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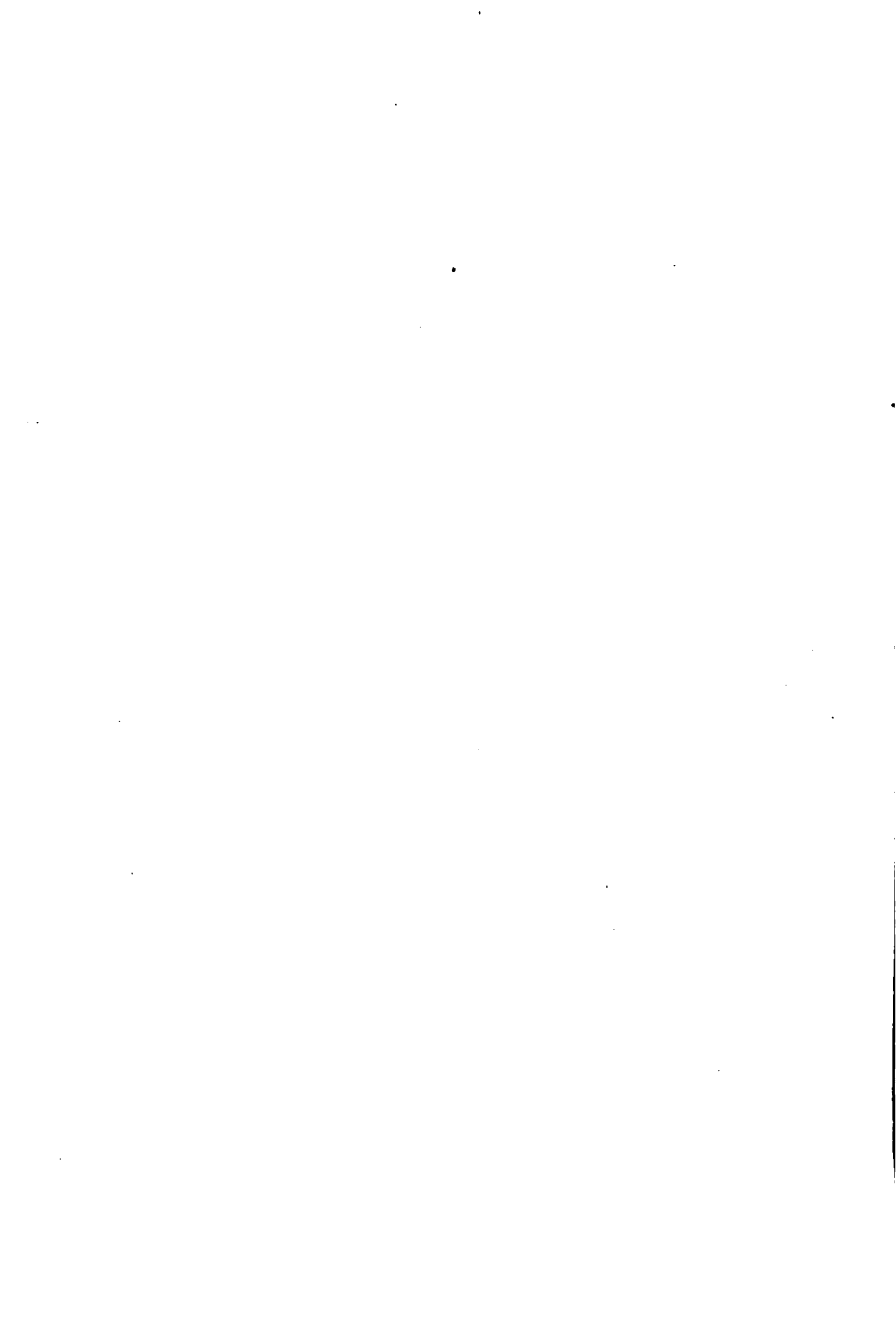








# THE HEAD STATION



# THE HEAD STATION

*A Novel of Australian Life*

BY

MRS. CAMPBELL-PRAED,

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON—CHAPMAN AND HALL  
LIMITED.

1885.

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256, e. 1888





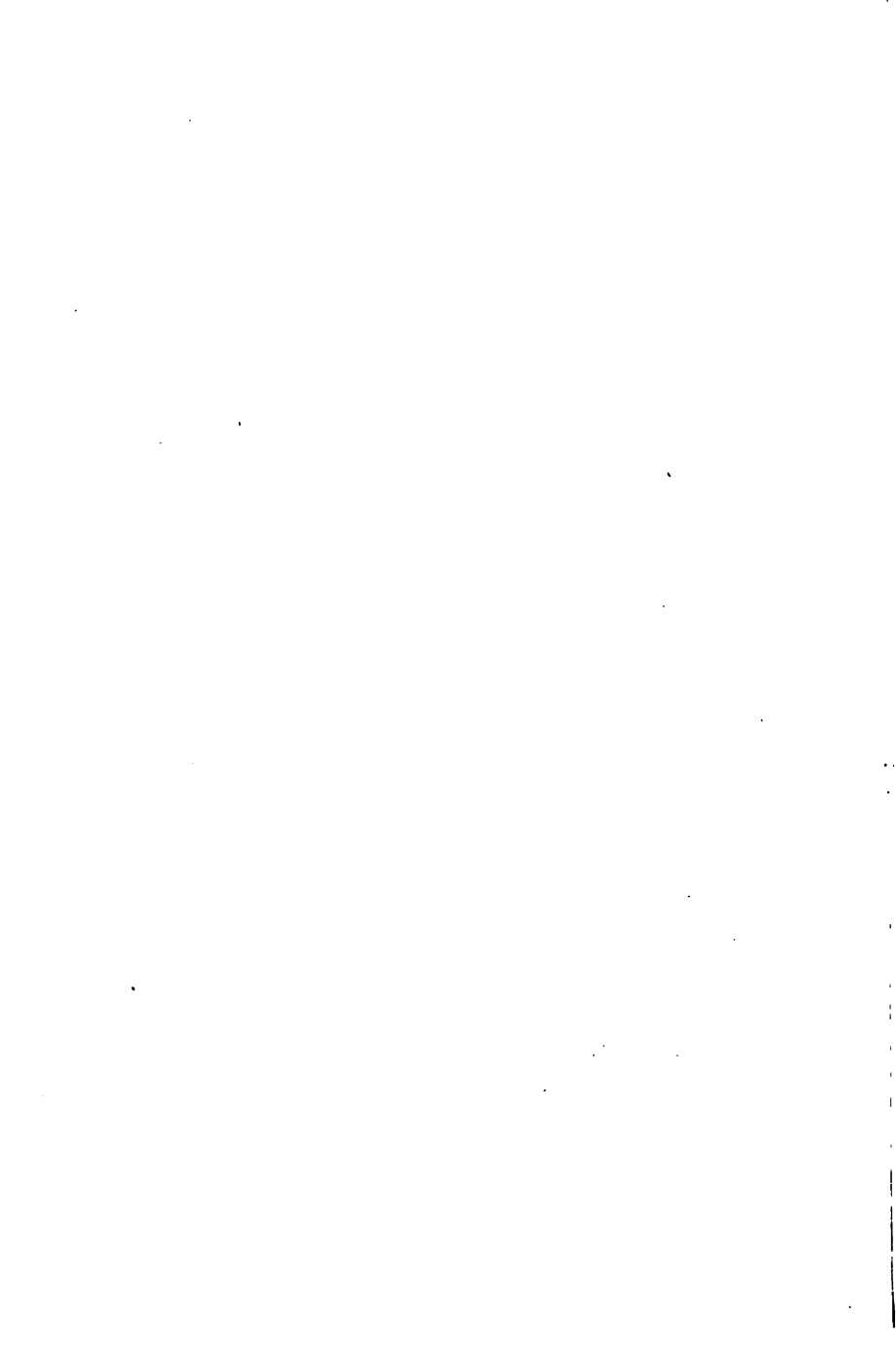
WESTMINSTER:  
PRINTED BY NICHOLS AND SONS,  
25, PARLIAMENT STREET.

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# THE HEAD STATION.

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## CHAPTER I.

### A BUSH FAMILY.

THERE could be no pleasanter place in which to dream away the hours of a hot December afternoon than the veranda of Doondi Head-Station, on the Eura River, in the colony of Leichardt's Land, Australia.

This veranda was very broad, and extended round three sides of the one-storied bungalow-like house. The bark roof slanted downwards, and projected its ragged edge beyond the log-posts, which were festooned with climbing-plants

peculiar to a sub-tropical climate—the orange bigonia, the Cape jessamine, the delicate white-flowered rinka-sporum—while one side was completely covered in by a large-leaved vine of the Isabella grape, which temptingly displayed its purpling fruit.

There were a great many French windows leading from the house on to the veranda. Through these, might be caught glimpses of low rooms, cedar-lined, canvas-ceiled, with rugs and skins spread upon the white boards; in the centre one, a piano, chintz-covered chairs and couches, and a litter of books and work; in another, the spotless drapery and white daintinesses of a woman's bed-chamber, left open to the general gaze, with that careless simplicity which is the charm of an Australian household.

From the slab walls, branching stag-

horn ferns stretched out their green antlers; mossy baskets hung from the rafters; here and there were ranged stands of calladiums and such exotic plants as require shade and damp. Squatters' chairs and canvas-covered lounges seemed to invite the indolent and weary; a sewing-machine stood in the coolest corner with a large basket of work by its side. Books, newspapers, and children's toys were scattered about in delightful confusion; a water-melon cut in half, and a dish of figs and guavas, were waiting to be eaten. It was very evident that the veranda was more lived in than the sitting-room. Here lay a knife of the kind which bushmen love, there a stray saddle-strap, and a dirty cabbage-tree hat. A loosely-coiled stock-whip looked at first sight like a big brown snake basking upon the boards.

Two kangaroo-hounds blinked and yapped at the bees which flitted from one deep-scented flower to its neighbour, and at the yellow mason-flies seeking their mud nests in the eaves.

Through the leaf-framed arches might be seen views of wild, uninhabited country. A vine-trellised garden sloped gently down to a scantily-timbered plain, where clumps of eucalyptus afforded meagre shade to groups of browsing cattle, and where gaunt trunks of trees, which had been "rung" and allowed to die slowly, stood like white skeletons waiting to be felled and burned.

In the middle distance lay undulating tracts of pasture and forest, grey-green in tint, with here and there a patch of scrub or dark line of creek or gully. Beyond, were mountains invading the south-eastern horizon—an irregular chain

forming the boundary between two colonies—jagged boulders, peaks, hump-like hills, covered at the base with dense jungle and eucalyptus forests, the summits rock-bound and weather-scarred. Here stood Mount Comongin with its rampart of granite, and the curious depression on its crown, said by geologists to be the crater of an extinct volcano, but where, according to the blacks' tradition, there dwelt in a lake that was fathomless, the great Bunyip, father of all the minor Bunyips, that haunted lagoons and waterholes. From the Doondi veranda, Comongin was an important feature in the landscape. Standing in the foreground, every crag distinct, every fissure traceable, the sentinel-like gumtrees showing white lines against the dull background, Comongin held his own among his more lofty brethren. To the right, there was Knapp's



Cliff, the half of a pyramid cleft in twain, its naked side, straight as a razor, gleaming in the sun. Then came a gap in the jagged outlines of more distant mountains, filled in by a blue sea of billowy hills, which spread to the horizon. Nearer, the twin peaks of Mount Tieryboo raised their virgin spires, which, within record, had never been scaled by either white man or aboriginal. And away to the left, another crag, a mighty citadel of Nature, bastions, towers, fortifications, all complete to the eye of Fancy, reared upon a gigantic wall of rock, in which were caves that might be the abode of giants, and clefts that seemed to lead into the very bowels of the earth.

It was a wild region. Here, in these fastnesses, rose the Eura river, which, after passing through Doondi, Gundalunda, and many other cattle-stations, swept

downwards through the southern corner of Leichardt's Land to the ocean. Here also lay the sources of the Doonbah. This stream flowed in another direction, thundering down the rocks, threading the Wild Man's Gorge, watering Captain Clephane's station, Tieryboo, and joining a greater river in New South Wales.

There was a dreamy stillness in the air verging upon oppression. Though afternoon had begun to wane, the heat was too intense for bird or insect to be noisy. A white haze clung to the hills telling of distant bush-fires. The wind was scorching, and the parched lawn and sun-baked walks seemed to be yearning for moisture. The more tender flowers drooped their heads, while flaming tiger-lilies, red hibiscus, and crimson verbenas flaunted their glaring colours aggressively. It was a relief to turn the eyes from a

pomegranate tree in full bloom to a well-watered and shaded rockery, where scrub-plants flourished, and maidenhair fern grew luxuriantly.

On this side of the house, a flight of log-steps led to a grove of orange-trees, under which the ground was strewn by a rain of fallen petals. This was apparently a favourite resort. Beneath the perfumy branches a hammock was slung, and here was a lady seated at work, with a baby sleeping in her lap, and two children, a girl of seven and a boy of five, playing by her side.

The lady was Mrs. Clephane, the second daughter of Duncan Reay, owner of Doondi. She was married to a neighbouring squatter, and with her children was now on a visit to her father. She was a placid, fair-faced woman of thirty, handsome, after the Scotch type, with a

straight rather thick nose; prominent cheekbones, benevolent lips, which receded, showing the gums, and full dark-lashed eyes.

She was stitching at a child's frock, but every now and then would pause and look out into vacancy with her soft violet eyes. Her eyes belied her character and the rest of her face. They suggested a romantic turn of mind, whereas she was only thinking, "I wonder whether there will be a mob of fat cattle ready for the butcher next month, for we shall want some extra comforts for Jack's niece--English people are so particular;" or, "I do wish that father would take up with politics again, and get into the Ministry. It would be so nice to have a few weeks at Leichardt's Town, especially now that there is going to be a new Governor;" or, "Unless the drays come soon we shall

not be able to make any mincemeat for Christmas," &c. . . . . Mrs. Clephane was perhaps a trifle uninteresting, but she was admirably adapted to her position as the wife of an ex-hussar, now a squatter, who presumably required a certain amount of common sense in his helpmate.

The boy was like his mother in face, and probably in temperament, to judge by the contented manner in which he pursued a somewhat monotonous occupation. He was scooping up the earth with his dimpled hands and a tin pannikin, and rearing a series of hillocks along the pathway, a proceeding which discomfited a tribe of wandering ants, and excited the remonstrances of his more enterprising sister.

She was an elf-like creature with solemn dark eyes, a mop of short black hair, and

skinny arms and shoulders, which were perpetually poking themselves out of her low-necked brown-holland blouse.

"Barty, I want to play. Get up, Barty. Let us play at 'maging something."

"I'se playing," stolidly answered Barty.

"Barty, are you making graves?"

"No," said Barty; "I'se making dampers."

"But, Barty, me and you will play at burying. We'll try to find a mantis to say the prayers. Barty," clasping her little hands in excitement, "it's bootiful to play at graves. Let us bury Moses."

Barty suspended his operations with the pannikin. "Oo hasn't got Moses, Jinks; God *deaded* him. Don't want to play at Moses."

"He was took to the top of a high mountain," said Jinks, reflectively. "I just 'spect it was Mount Comongin, for

nobody never goes there except the blacks when it is bunya-time. Barty, let us 'magine the blacks are the children of Israel, and they brought him down, and we went to the camp and fetched him out. Barty," she added, reflectively, for the suggestion did not appear to stimulate Barty's prosaic fancy, "if this was Moses' grave, shouldn't you like to see him come out and go into another?"—in an awestruck whisper, "He'd have wings, Barty."

"Don't want to," steadily repeated Barty. "Go away, Jinks. Oo is a bad girl. Oo's trod on my dampers."

"I wish there was some grown-up people here to play with me," said Jinks, with dignity. "Children is so tiresome. I think you must be cutting a tooth, Barty, you're so scotty." After this scathing remark, Jinks turned to her

mother. "Mamma, when is Grandfather coming home?"

"I don't know to a day, Jinks," placidly replied Mrs. Clephane.

"Mamma, when are we going back to Tieryboo?"

"Gracious! how can I tell, child? When the mustering is done, and the drays have come up, and when we've got a new cook."

"Can't father's niece cook?"

"That's certain she can't, Jinks."

"But why? You and Aunt Hester can. And Aunt Gretta makes the butter."

"Well, England is different from Australia," said Mrs. Clephane, smoothing the gusset she was stitching. "There are plenty of servants to do things, and Isabel Gauntlett—that's Father's niece—has been used to grand ways. Just you remember that, Jinks, and keep quiet and don't mess about, or else she'll go back again."



"She wants a lot of people to bring her here," said Jinks, contemptuously. "There's father and grandfather and Combo and Billy. I expect she's got a lot of things. New chums always have a big pack. Is she going to stop at Gundalunda with Aunt Judith and Mr. Ferguson?"

"She'll stop there while Grandfather goes over to Nash's for the cattle," said Mrs. Clephane. "Now don't bother, child; you're always asking foolish questions."

"Some things is true and some things isn't," said Jinks, oracularly, "and little girls must ask to be told."

"Where's England?" inquired Bart, roused by Jinks's statement to a sense of his own deficiencies.

"Dunce!" cried Jinks, with scorn. "Miss Barham showed it to you on the

map. It's where father lived when he was a little boy; and it's all on the Christmas cards. Red berries grow out of the plum-puddings, and the grass is covered with a white table-cloth."

"Snow, Jinks," amended her mother. "Snow is soft like cotton-wool, and it melts like ice."

"If it is like wool it isn't ice," argued Jinks. "Did you ever see snow, mother?"

"No," admitted Mrs. Clephane. "I am a Leichardt's Land native—like you."

"Nor Aunt Gretta, nor Maafu, nor Uncle Sib, nor nobody else has ever seen snow except father, and he does sometimes tell crackers," continued Jinks, weighing the question of evidence. "Cockamaroo is a cracker. If he did live on Comongin, and had his dinner off stewed children, he'd have eaten up all

the piccaninnies; and there are lots in the blacks' camp. Perhaps snow is gammon; Uncle Sib says Christmas cards are gammon. I wish Isabel Gauntlett would put some snow in an envelope and send it to me to look at. I'd like to see England. When Patrick Desmond asks me again to marry him I'll tell him yes if he'll promise to take me to England. That's what Aunt Gretta answers. Mother," added Jinks, suddenly, "Red Dick, from Gundalunda, says that Mr. Ferguson is courting Aunt Gretta. And when they are engaged will she get like Miss Barham and say everything is 'so sweet'?"

Jinks threw herself into a mincing attitude, and was sternly reproved for mimicking her governess, and for listening to the stockmen's talk. Whereupon she moved loftily away, and began to

interrogate a Kanaka boy who was digging a few paces off.

“Maafu,” said Jinks, “do you ever go courting?”

79 The Kanaka paused in his work and turned upon the child a puzzled black face, round which the crisp woolly hair, artificially lightened by the use of lime-wash, stood out like a dull aureole. Then he laughed with the fatuous chuckle of the South Sea Islander, which differs considerably from the impish merriment of the aboriginal, and resumed his digging.

“I daresay,” observed Jinks, condescendingly, “that you have a different word for it in your language. What do you call the place you come from, Maafu?”

“Tanna Island, Misse Jinks.”

“And did you like leaving your home, Maafu? Or did they kidnap you like

the man in Mr. Desmond's song?" And Jinks rolled out in unmelodious falsetto, with a fair attempt at a brogue,

*"Set every stitch of canvas,  
To woo the freshening wind,  
Our bowsprit points to Cuba,  
The coast lies far behind;  
Filled to the hatches full, my boys,  
Across the sea we go.  
There's twice five hundred niggers  
In the stifling hold below.*

"My word, Miss Jinks, dat lubly," said Maafu, admiringly.

"No, Maafu, it isn't lovely," replied Jinks, impelled to candour by the consciousness of superior knowledge. "I am afraid you are not a judge of music. My father says the only song I can sing is "the tune the old cow died of"; and that means something nasty. Tell me, Maafu, why did you leave your island? Weren't you afraid of being beaten and of having a master, like Legree, you know? But perhaps you have never read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Maafu?"

The Kanaka shook his head incomprehendingly.

“It’s a nice story,” said Jinks. “I think we might play at Eva and Uncle Tom—you and me. You’re black, and I’m—no, Eva was a good girl, and Jinks is most always naughty. Jinks takes a lot of whopping. The devil gets inside of her,” here Jinks tragically struck her breast—“and he’d never go out unless he was whopped. It’s an awful pity, Maafu. Did you come in a ship from Tanna?”

“Big ship, Missee Jinks, sailors white, all the rest Tanna and Leefoo men,” replied Maafu, becoming animated. “White captain say, ‘You come to Leichardt’s Land and work, one, two, three year; then you come back again—Massa give you clothes—give you money—you buy tools—you build good house—make your wife like white woman. Missionary—he say ‘go.’”

“Oh, you’ve got a wife, Maafu!” interrupted Jinks, deeply interested. “Does she wear a wedding-ring like mother and Aunt Hester?”

The question seemed a serious difficulty to Maafu. He sighed, hung his head, and let his spade drop. “Missee Jinks,” he said, “every white missees wear ring. My wife, she not have ring—no ring—no good marry. In one year Maafu’s time up, and he go back to Tanna. Massa Reay, he very kind to Maafu. He lub Missee Jinks. You ask Massa Reay to give Maafu wedding-ring, so that he make his wife real missus, like white woman?”

Jinks reflected, then nodded approvingly, the idea commending itself to her sense of propriety. “That’s very right of you, Maafu; I’ll ask grandfather. And you mustn’t ever be scotty with your

wife, or hit her over the head with a nulla-nulla like Combo. But, as you're married, you can't ask any one else. I don't think girls would want to marry you," continued Jinks, impartially, as she surveyed the Kanaka from head to toe, "though a whitewoman did marry Jack Nutty, our black stockman at Tieryboo; and I'd rather marry you than Combo, Maafu. However, there's no use in thinking of it, for you mustn't even court. You're like Aunt Hester."

"Mrs. Murgatroyd?" asked Maafu, thoughtfully, not at once perceiving the aptness of the comparison.

"She has got a husband, you know, Maafu, only nobody will say where he is. I heard Red Dick telling Mrs. Baynes that it was of no use for people to come courting Aunt Hester, for that she was worse than married already."



“Jinks!” Mrs. Clephane called sharply from under the orange-trees. “Come here. What is that you are saying?”

“Maafu wants to see the baby, mother,” promptly replied Jinks. She was well aware that it was treason to talk to the servants of her Aunt Hester, who had married unhappily, and was separated from a bad husband. “Come, Maafu.”

Maafu grinned delightedly; and, led by Jinks, stepped modestly towards the white bundle lying on Mrs. Clephane’s lap. He stared at it with tender, round, black eyes for a minute, then said, solemnly, “Dat child a very nice baby, missus,” and went back to his digging.

The Kanaka reverences women and adores children. He is loyal in heart, affectionate of disposition, and domestic in his habits. He has implicit faith in the master who is kind to him, though his

soul will rise in passionate revolt against ill-treatment or betrayal of confidence.

The native black, on the other hand, knows that honour and fair dealing, like clean nails, are among the absurd peculiarities of the gentleman; and draws a sharp line between the squatter who keeps his word and cleans his nails and the bullock-driver who does neither. But he has no real appreciation of the virtues in point, and does not resent their absence. Far less culpable would it be to meet a black's guile with treachery, or to cheat a wideawake white man, than to abuse the child-like confidence of the Kanaka. Praise and sympathy are life to him. Harshness stupefies, and, if carried to excess, kills him, for the Kanaka has no great vitality, and dies when life seems no longer a thing to be desired.

## CHAPTER II.

HESTER MURGATROYD.

JINKS received a lecture. She was told that little girls had no business to talk of their elders, and was for the hundredth time forbidden to go into the kitchen during the visits of Red Dick or of any other stockman in the district.

“But, mother, it was in the dairy, not the kitchen. Mrs. Baynes was skimming the cream because Aunt Gretta had gone for a ride; and Uncle Jo sent me for some thick milk to feed his sick calf. And Red Dick did say that it'd be a

good thing for Aunt Hester if she could find out for certain that her husband was dead. Where is he, mother?"

"Go away, child. I've no patience with your curiosity," said Mrs. Clephane, glancing uneasily towards a corner of the veranda where her sister, Hester Murgatroyd, was sitting, in an odd but not ungraceful attitude, her knees drawn up to her chin, and upon them a book, over which she was poring. She looked completely absorbed; but some part of the conversation must have reached her, for she flung down the book with a sudden gesture of wrath, and rising to her feet came down the log-steps towards the little group under the orange-tree.

The incorrigible Jinks was saying, "I'll ask Aunt Hester: and, if he is dead, I'll just tell Red Dick so, and Aunt Hester may marry any one she likes."

“You will hold your tongue, Jinks; and, if Red Dick is ever again so impertinent as to talk of my concerns in your hearing, you will bid him mind his own business. I thought you were a kind-hearted child and a little lady. If you were one or the other you would know that it is insulting to me to be spoken of in that way by the stockmen.”

There was a passionate tremor in Mrs. Murgatroyd's voice. Jinks flushed crimson, and her black eyes dilated as she looked up at her aunt.

“Aunt Hester, I *am* a lady; and you shall just see. And, if I forget, you shall whop me.”

A peculiar, long-drawn *Cooëe* sounded from behind the house. “That's Uncle Sib, I bet,” cried Jinks; and darted away followed by Barty. Mrs. Clephane went on placidly with her needlework.

Hester Murgatroyd made a few hurried steps down the gravel-path and back again. "Mollie," she cried, with a sort of fierce pathos, "how can you sit sewing there without a word, when you know I'm in such trouble that I can't rest?"

Mrs. Clephane laid down her needle, and gazed at her sister with puzzled eyes.

"I didn't think you minded, Hester—now."

"Now!" repeated Hester. "Don't you know that my husband," and her voice rang with scorn, "has been out of prison for ever so long? People will hear of it and there'll soon be some gossip for the men's huts. You don't suppose that I'm to be left in peace."

"He can't do anything," said Mrs. Clephane, weakly. "I asked Jack; you

are quite safe. And he would never come to these parts. Is it about *that* you are troubled, Hester?"

Hester did not answer for a minute. A rush of blood dyed her face. "I can't sleep at night," she said, abruptly.

"You couldn't write—you couldn't make a play out of it, Hester?" suggested Mrs. Clephane. "Don't you remember how, at first, when you were sleepless you always got up and scribbled—I can see you now with your head down close to the paper—and how cross I used to get with you for waking me up and making me listen to your plays!"

"Oh, Mollie, don't go back to that."

"But Hester, you were such a funny girl! I've always said you were a shingle short, you know—talking to yourself, crying and laughing over a book, and getting into a state over some impossible

scheme, while you'd forget all about real things, and let your clothes go unmended, and the store empty, and the men short of rations. You have been all up in the clouds again lately. I thought you had forgotten you were ever married. I didn't suppose you were worrying about anything but books and ideas. It's no use worrying, Hester. He'll never bother you again. It's just a fit. You'll get over it, and take up a new set of ideas. You wouldn't have a turn at the sewing-machine? Or—what have you done with all the plays, Hester?"

"Burned them," laconically replied Hester. And she broke into a most melancholy and unmirthful laugh which roused the baby asleep upon her sister's knee.

Mrs. Clephane rose and rocked her matronly form to and fro, cradling the



child against her breast. But the little thing's crying would not be stilled.

"Well, it is a bad job," said Mollie, regretfully, not referring to the baby, which she kissed with rapture, and apostrophized as a hungry "little ducksie," that had slept past its dinner-hour, and should be fed at once—that it should.

Then she went into the house with her infant, and Hester Murgatroyd remained alone under the orange-trees.

In Australia, a woman past thirty has lost the tender grace and the fairness of youth. This was the case with Hester Murgatroyd. She was thirty-two, and her girlhood was gone for ever. She had never been beautiful; but she had been always, and was now, supremely interesting. "Indefinable charm" is a stock phrase, and one grows tired of its use, implying as it does so much, and express-

ing so little. Nevertheless, this indefinable charm is a very real possession, and Hester unconsciously rejoiced in it.

She was tall and rather angular, but she moved freely, and the spontaneity of her gestures gave them a sort of dignity. She was not careful of her appearance, and despised little arts of dress and the fashions and daintinesses in which most women take pleasure. But this contempt of detail harmonised with her bearing, and her limp muslin draperies fell naturally into becoming folds, while chestnut hair with a ripple in it, needs no elaborate dressing when it adorns a head well set on.

Hester's eyes were brown, with irises so large that no white showed in the centre between the upper and lower lids. They were slightly prominent, very dreamy, and had an expression of innocence and

unconscious pathos rarely seen except in the eyes of an animal or a child. Her features were irregular, the cheek-bones too high, the lips too thin, and the upper one too long; while her complexion, naturally fine and delicate, had the withered look produced by extreme paleness. Her smile, however, was full of suggestiveness, and her wistful eyes seemed to be telling a sorrowful story.

She stood for a minute or two quite motionless, with her hands tightly clasped before her, while she gazed out towards Mount Comongin. Steps sounding upon the veranda caused her to start and colour. But the flush died away as she recognised in the new comer her half-brother; and she nodded composedly, turning to ascend the steps.

“ Oh, Sib ! so it is you ! I suppose that everything is right at the Selection ? ”

"How do you do, Hester? The fencers are short of rations. Pretty hot, isn't it? And this is your birthday."

"Yes, Sib. I am thirty-two to-day. Thank you for remembering it."

Mrs. Clephane appeared at one of the French windows without the baby. "Oh, Hester," she exclaimed, guiltily, "how stupid of me! I had forgotten. You should have reminded me."

"Why, Mollie? Why should any one think of my birthdays? I am getting old, I am thankful to say, and they are best passed over without remark."

Sib, or more properly, Sebastian Reay, flung himself into a squatter's chair, and mopped his face with a red silk pocket-handkerchief. Sebastian was not so good-looking as his sisters. He was a lean, stolid-faced youth, uncouth and gawky, with dog-like brown eyes, somewhat re-

sembling Hester's in expression, a roughly-trimmed beard and moustache, and legs and arms which seemed to belong rather to space in general than to his own body. He did not live at Doondi, but at a Selection, a few miles up the river. Sib eyed Mrs. Murgatroyd with a questioning canine sort of anxiety.

"Anything gone against the grain, Hester?" he asked.

Her lips quivered. She turned away her face, and answered with a forced laugh, "No, Sib; but it's too hot for any one to be cheerful."

Sib whistled sympathetically. He guessed that something was amiss, but did not inquire. He was a young man of few words, and jerked out his sentences with difficulty.

Just then there came dancing out of the sitting-room as bright and beautiful a

girl as could well be seen in either old world or new. A slender figure in blue muslin, with a coquettish bib and apron and fluttering ribbons; hair which gave golden glints in the sunshine; grey Irish eyes clear as baby's; a sweet mouth with a beseeching droop at the corners; a skin like the leaf of a tea-rose; and a voice, for she sang in snatches as she moved, fresh and tender as a bird's trill.

## CHAPTER III.

## GRETТА'S VIEWS.

THIS was Gretta, the youngest and only unmarried one of the daughters. It must be explained that Duncan Reay of Doondi had had two wives. His first had borne him Hester and Mollie; his second, an Irishwoman, had been the mother of Sebastian and Gretta. She was dead. Gretta was ten years younger than her half-sister Mrs. Clephane. She kissed the tips of her fingers to Sib, and began to pluck at a bunch of grapes.

"You're just too late to see father, Sib," said Mrs. Clephane. She was the only one of the sisters with any tendency

to the Australian drawl. "He started for Gundalunda directly after lunch."

"Where's Jack Clephane?" asked Sib.

"Oh, hadn't you heard? Isabel Gauntlett's steamer was telegraphed, and Jack went to Leichardt's Town to meet her. She'll stop at Gundalunda for a day or two, and he'll go on with father to Nash's Station, and inspect that mob of cows."

"What do you think of that, Sib?" said Gretta. Her accent was decidedly Irish—the prettiest accent in the whole category, when producing a mere broadening of the vowels and melodious rounding of the words, as though, metaphorically, honey were dropping. It was curious to note how the family gave evidence of a mixed nationality. "Your divinity is about to present herself in the flesh, and you need no longer confine yourself to adoring a photograph."



"Sib's divinity!" sharply echoed Mrs. Clephane.

"Oh, Mollie! So you never suspected Sib of cherishing a secret passion? It is perfectly true, though. He persuaded your husband to give him an old photograph of Miss Gauntlett, and it hangs in his room over Billy the bull's pedigree, like an angel's image above a monumental inscription. By-the-way, how is Billy, Sib?"

"Died last night of pleuro," lugubriously announced Sib.

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Mrs. Clephane. "I am glad the Tieryboo cattle have been inoculated."

"There's a theme for Mr. Durnford's muse," heartlessly rejoined Gretta. "Our poet-tutor! But I don't fancy that his bent is towards the comic. He is like that wandering butcher who weighed fifteen

stone, and who came all along the Eura during the drought searching for fat cattle, and finding none. Don't you remember him, Hester? His face was like a ripe prickly-pear; and he was fond of reciting Hamlet's soliloquy. 'Tragedy, Miss Reay, tragedy is the figure for me.'" It might be remarked that Jinks and her aunt shared a fine faculty of mimicry. "Well," continued the young lady, "I suppose that inoculation will form the cheerful theme of conversation for some time to come."

"Anything been doing, Gretta?" asked Sib.

"Life couldn't be at a lower ebb," answered Gretta, emphatically. "Two suspicious-looking Free Selectors were seen prowling about the Main Camp yesterday, so we had all the station-maps out, ventilated the question of the Land

Laws pretty freely, and held a council of war as to the expediency of doing a little 'dummying.' Oh, that the Reay energies would expend themselves upon something less depressing than cattle! There is not a spark of enterprise in the whole family. Think of living within thirty miles of a gold-field and not owning a claim. We have been dull as ditch-water. They are mustering at Gundalunda, so we have had no visitors this week."

Sib laughed. "Is that your grievance, Gretta?"

"No, indeed. I have a most melancholy piece of intelligence to communicate. It has been on my mind since eleven o'clock. We are going to lose our poet. Mr. Durnford has given notice. We must look out for another tutor."

"What?" asked Sib. "Has the old

uncle at Toowoona sent for him back again?"

"That is not likely," put in Mollie. "They had a regular quarrel."

"I don't wonder," said Gretta. "Fancy expecting a poet to manage a public-house."

"He wasn't a poet then," demurred Mollie.

"Well, imagine a gentleman serving out doctored grog to a set of diggers!"

"It was an hotel," corrected Mrs. Clephane. "Jack once set up a first-class accommodation-house," she added, as though this settled the question.

"On the principle that a depraved taste for rum might be corrected by sour beer," laughed Gretta. "That was one of your husband's moral speculations, Mollie; and it went smash like the pigs and the kangaroo-hides."

Mrs. Clephane looked a little ruffled. "At any rate," she said, "Mr. Durnford might have found it worth while to try and please his uncle. If he had shown that that wasn't his line, old Raikes would perhaps have given him some money to start for himself."

"My mother's sister hasn't demeaned herself by marrying an ex-publican," said Gretta, with spirit; "but if she had I should do as Mr. Durnford did—cut the connection, and 'up stick and yan,' as the blacks say."

Mrs. Murgatroyd, who had been snipping the withered blossoms from a pot of gloxinia, started at the beginning of the conversation, and turned, looking for an instant as though she would have spoken. Repressing the impulse, she stooped more closely over the stand of flowers and went on with her occupation.

"Hester," said Gretta, "haven't you seen Mr. Durnford since Bill Stone brought the mail?"

"No," replied Hester, in a stifled voice.

"Then you don't know. He hasn't consulted you—you, his Egeria."

The scissors dropped from Hester's hand. She faced her sister, her eyes gleaming, though her cheeks were paler than usual. "What do you mean?" she cried, passionately. "What right have you—what right have people to say such things?"

"Gracious!" said Gretta, opening her grey eyes wider. "It's only a little chaff. What harm is there in comparing you with Egeria—or Aspasia—no, she wasn't proper—or any other intellectual young woman with a mission. You are always talking of Mr. Durnford's mission. Here's an opportunity for him. They

want to make him sub-editor to the *Leichardt's Land Review*. The letter came this morning and I heard him telling father about it. I shall owe Gustavus Blaize one for that," added Gretta, savagely. "It is he who has done it. He fancies himself a patron of literature. I know that he writes for the *Review*. Well, he has robbed our household of its one male member whose interests are not distinctly bucolic. 'Soul cannot march to the bleating of sheep or the lowing of cattle,' as saith another poet. What do you think about it, Hester?"

Mrs. Murgatroyd hesitated for a moment. "You shouldn't be sorry, Gretta," she said. "It will be a step to something better. He ought not to bury himself here. There are so few Australian writers. It is they who will shape the future of Australia."

"Oh!" sighed Gretta. "Don't you go and be joining in that cant about the future of Australia. It's such a cheap way of glorifying ourselves. We have no past to boast of, so we invent a future. I prefer a country with a history. Here it is all nature—nature. I should like a little art for a change. What have you got in your swag, Sib?"

Sebastian unstrapped a valise which he had brought with him, and threw on the floor a collection of books and periodicals, most of them in new bindings.

"Why, Sib," said Gretta, pouncing upon them, "you have been to Leichardt's Town. What are all these? Poetry. '*Browning's Dramatis Personæ*.' '*The Light of Asia*.'"

"That's for you, Hester. So you can give Durnford back his copy."

"Thank you," said Hester, faintly.



She did not look Sib in the face, but moved a pace or two apart and turned over the pages of one of the volumes. Her eyes fell upon the opening stanzas of *Prospice*; and then like a rush, all came over her, turning her giddy. The sunny veranda, the light talk, the cloud-flecked mountain, the scent of flowers, the crunching sound made by Maafu's spade as he turned up the dry soil—seemed the unrealities of a dream; and for the moment she was standing, the mist in her face, the fog in her throat, before her a bitter ordeal—not the meeting through death but the parting in life.

"*The Nineteenth Century, The Australasian, 'Is Life worth Living,'*" read Mrs. Clephane, continuing the list.

"Certainly not," interjected Gretta, "until a thunderstorm has cleared the air."

"It is coming," said Hester. She wanted to hear the sound of her own voice—to assure herself that she was not dreaming. "Look how the clouds are gathering round Mount Comongin."

"My dear Sib," said Gretta, "why this shower of modern literature? Is it with the view of raising us to Miss Gauntlett's intellectual level."

"I thought," rejoined Sib, looking red and rather sheepish, "that she might miss what she has been accustomed to in England. She'll expect to find us all a set of Goths."

"Speak for yourself Sib," retorted Gretta. "You forget that *I* have largely enjoyed the advantage of Mr. Gustavus Blaize's society—and quotations. I may be a barbarian, but I'm not a benighted one. Why," she added in a different tone, "I daresay that I have read more

books than Miss Gauntlett herself—and think more of such things than she who has lived within reach of everything that is best in the world. I dream of music and pictures, grand old churches, historic castles, beautiful women, and refined heroic men. Ah! we Australians are like birds shut up in a large cage; our lives are little and narrow, for all that our home is so big.” Gretta’s voice gained an odd intensity as she proceeded: “I want something more than great plains, trees, and mountains. I am tired of cattle, and horses, and books. Books don’t satisfy. I want to fall down and worship . . . . Sib, *you* know what I mean. *You’re* always dreaming about England, I know you are—although you are so rough, and so very colonial, poor boy. Oh, dear me! we are not patriots, are we, Sib?”

Sib silently shook his head.

"I shall never marry any one," said Gretta, with energy, "who has not lived all his life in England."

"Then I'll tell Ferguson of Gundalunda not to ride here courting," cried one of two schoolboys, lean, long-legged, and indeterminate of feature, who had come through the sitting-room to the veranda just in time to catch the end of Gretta's harangue. "You had better think twice over 'Old Gold.'"

"He is at any rate a relic of the past," observed Gretta.

*"Dyspepsy would a-wooing go,  
Whether his love would have it or no,"*

cried the second schoolboy. "Mr. Gustavus Blaize rode over from Wyeroo on purpose to propose, Sib. You never saw such a guy as 'Old Gold' turned out. He might have been set up in the Cultivation Paddock for a scarecrow to frighten

the cockatoos. I say, girls, what is the thermometer down here? 102°. It's only 99° in the veranda of the Bachelors' Quarters. Come along up there. We have slung another hammock, and have put a melon to cool in the water-cask. He is a real wapper; green champagne—the first of the season.”

“Mark and Joseph,” said Gretta, solemnly, “the thought of that melon is too much for me. As Uncle Blaize would remark, ‘A melon is an agreeable fruit upon a hot day.’ I’ll go, but I make one condition: you’ll be good enough to refrain from your unseemly jokes in the presence of your tutor.”

“Oh, Durnford is not at the Quarters,” said Jo. “He marched out with his Euripides directly after lessons, and is half-way to Knapp’s Cliff by now. You can air your views quite freely, Gretta.

Honour bright. I say, I'm sorry you have settled against Ferguson ; I should not have objected to him as a brother-in-law. He's a real good chap—a sort of Geoffrey Hamlyn fellow, you know. By George ! he *can* sit a buck-jumper ; and you should just have seen him running down an ' old man ' when we were kangaroo-hunting at Gundalunda. But I suppose he isn't what you'd call a cultivated chap."

" I'll tell you what, Gretta," said Mark, " if I were you I would not clinch matters with anybody till Ferguson's partner has come out from England. Bertram Wyatt will be here soon, now. You'll have a rare good opportunity for comparing Young Australia with the superfine home articles—finished up at Oxford and extra-polished in the best London society."

" How do you know that, Mark ? "

" Did not you hear old Gustavus Blaize

telling us all how he had been to Mr. Bertram Wyatt's rooms during that last never-to-be-forgotten trip home, and had seen his chimney-glass stuck full of invitations from all kinds of swells. I thought it was a rum place to put them."

"When Gustavus Blaize dies, if he ever gets to Heaven's gate, he'll say it is not good enough for him, and ask to be sent back to England," remarked Jo.

"Look here, Gretta," continued Mark, impressively, "you must try your hand on Mr. Bertram Wyatt. You'll find it good practice to flirt with him. Think of the experience he has had; and, as you cannot be everybody's first love, your pride needn't be hurt by playing second fiddle to the Governor's daughter."

"Mark, you are vulgar, you are insulting!" cried Gretta.

"Aunt Judith says that Mr. Wyatt is

still broken-hearted," said Mr. Clephane, "and that Miss Baldock was very fond of him. It was her father that broke off the match. And, now that General Baldock has been moved to this Governorship, Aunt Judith has quite made up her mind that the engagement will be on again."

"Come, boys," said Gretta, "let us go and attack the melon. Where's Jinks? Hester, are you coming?"

"No," replied Hester. "My head is aching, I want a walk."

"Don't go too far," said Sebastian. "There is a storm brewing—and a hail-storm if I know the sky."

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Gretta. "Then there's some hope that we may spend to-night in our beds instead of lying gasping in the hammocks. Collect all the hailstones you can, boys, and put



them in the dairy. To-morrow is my churning-day.

"I wish," said Mr. Clephane, as they walked up towards the Bachelors' Quarters, a wooden verandahed cottage midway between the house and the stockyard, "that Hester would stay in this afternoon. She'll get soaked."

"Oh!" said Gretta, carelessly, "it won't be the first time. An idea strikes Hester, and she starts up and carries it through without thinking of anything else. She has got excited over poetry or something, and wants a vent for her feelings."

## CHAPTER IV.

## HESTER'S SORROW.

HESTER MURGATROYD was left alone. She glanced up at the sky and then towards the mountains. The twin peaks of Tiery-boo looked grey and threatening against a background of greyish cloud; but Comongin stood forth clear. Comongin was the Doondi weatherglass. By the law of signs and tokens, she assured herself, there would be no storm before nightfall.

Not that it would have kept her at home. Gretta was right. Poor Hester

was in the mood to be soothed by the strife of elements. What matter if it thundered and hailed? The crash and the terror would be welcome—anything to divert her mind from the dreary aching, the sense of suffocation she was enduring. She must be alone. She must escape from Sib's dumb solicitude, from the boys' witless jokes, from Gretta's girlish levity. She must draw deep breaths, and let out the pain which was choking her.

Hester went forth. She walked swiftly across the paddock, through the sliprails, and past a blacks' camp which lay between the fence and the river. The king of the tribe, a white-haired, mangy-looking chieftain, sat enthroned upon his opossum rug, his boomerang and waddy by his side, and a dirty clay pipe between his toothless jaws. Other dusky forms covered with hideous weals and blue

hieroglyphics, sprawled on red blankets at the opening of their gunyahs. The gins, or elder women, blear-eyed emaciated creatures, lay basking in the sun, liberally displaying their tattooed limbs, and ministering alternately to the wants of their lords and their piccaninnies. The lubras—girls—smoother of skin and with the comeliness of dancing eyes and glistening teeth, leaned against the trees and plaited dilly-bags, or gnawed bones while they chattered like a covey of parrots.

The old king playfully launched a waddy in the direction of the new comer, and bestirred himself so far as to call back the dogs which ran barking from the camp.

“Hester, where you go, Hester?” cried his Majesty. “Stop and woollah along a old man. Old man cobbon sick.” Then followed whining cries, “Hester, white Mary! Budgery white Mary. This ole

woman cobbon poor fellow Ba'al toombacco! Ba'al blanket! Ba'al rations!" And then another series of groans, and the advance of a bevy of gins, each one more piteous and more loquacious than her companion.

Hester moved aside to escape these importunities, and, forsaking the horse-track, walked where no path was, by the edge of the river which girt the plain and wound up into the mountains.

The white cedar spread its scented plumes of lilac-blossom above her head. The glossy-leaved chestnut dropped its heavy pods at her feet. The ti-trees touched her shoulders with their crimson bottle-brush flowers. In some places the bed of the river was wide, and cattle-tracks led down to a natural crossing. The stream gurgled gently over round stones and brilliant rock crystals, and the

banks shelving backward, were overgrown by a spiky yellow-flowered cactus which gave forth a strong perfume ; while here and there, a tiny landslip sheltered brakes of maidenhair fern. Now, a fallen log intercepted the water's course, and the stream fell in a miniature cascade into some deep dark pool, where eddies twirled sluggishly over a fathomless hole, and driftwood gathered thickly at flood-mark ; or again, the channel contracted between grassy cliffs, or the current flowed turbid and dark by fringing beds of deadly arum sand thickets of mulgams.

Hester trod carefully, alive from habit to a sense of danger, and once or twice started aside in dread of the *piora* serpent, which frequents the banks of creeks, or paused to assure herself that some stick lying at her feet was not a black snake or a sleeping death-adder.

Gradually, she left the plain behind, and the country grew wilder, as the river entered a defile, which narrowed almost to a point between granite hills. At the distance of about a mile and a half from the paddock-fence the ravine widened again. On one side, the river ran close under a steep rise, on which the long-bladed grass grew rank, and bracken fern offered no temptation to adventurous kine; on the other, the hills sloped more gently to the level; and, jutting out beneath the rocky crest of an inaccessible-looking ridge, rose a grassy knoll, its summit a plateau, in the centre of which was a green patch fenced by iron railings.

Here, a giant eucalyptus of the kind called "apple-tree," which somewhat resembles the oak, spread its branches over a little cemetery containing but one grave—that of a child.

Hester ascended the rise, and, unlocking the iron gate with a key which she took from her pocket, entered the enclosure.

Maafu the Kanaka had been there that morning. This, Hester saw at a glance. The fallen leaves of the evergreen cur-rajong-tree, which shadowed the grave, had been lately swept. The grass was newly mown, there were no dead blossoms upon the flowering verbena plants which covered the little mound. The headstone was wreathed with jasmine, recently clipped, so that it might not encroach upon the inscription, which ran thus :

In Memory of MAGGIE,

Only child of HESTER MURGATBOYD, and granddaughter of  
DUNCAN REAY,

Who died at Doondi, of diphtheria, Sept. 23, 18—.

Aged 4 years.

“And death carried her child to the Unknown Land.”



Hester sank upon the grass. She stretched out her arms upon the grave and hid her face upon them. Sobs shook her frame.

“Oh, my baby! my baby!” she whispered to the sod. “Why were you taken from me? It was cruel—it’s unjust. Women can’t live without something to love. They weren’t meant to. They’ve got hearts. If I had had you I should never have thought—I should not feel like this.”

The rising gasps, drawn up as it were from the depths of her being, stifled this pitiful plaint. When her tears began to fall she grew calmer, and after a little while lifted her wet face, and raised herself to a crouching attitude, her hands clasping her knees, her eyes fixed on vacancy.

She sat thus for some time, formless

fancies floating through her mind—all bringing a sense of bitterness and indefinite injury, with something black and terrible in the background which she had not courage to examine. She was too wretched to think collectedly. She felt dazed; and, also, a womanly instinct made her shrink from analysing the cause of her misery. She saw only images of possibilities, fair and ennobling, shadowed upon a blank wall, which seemed to shut her out from a realisation of the actual. Then a stinging suggestion smote her, and in a moment her mental attitude was changed. The blood came rushing to her cheeks, and she started up as though she had found the smart intolerable. Involuntarily she stretched forth her arms, as if to push the doubt from her, then let them fall helplessly by her side, and stood erect, her eyes gazing

outward in tearless dismay, while her lips trembled like those of a frightened child. "It's because of me," she said, in a broken whisper, "that he is going away. It is because he thinks that I am —because I ——" The pain shook her beyond self-control. Her hands were flung over her burning face. "Oh, I do love him!" she said, aloud. "I do love him! I can't bear it."

The cry brought relief. She restlessly paced the inclosure. There crept over her a sense of spiritual companionship with the person who filled her thoughts. Every now and then, she glanced round moved by the fancy that he was near. It had grown curiously dark, and the sultriness had increased. Scarcely a leaf stirred. There was no sound but that of the rushing river below. Overhead, the sky was grey-green, and lower on the horizon,

lurid. To the east, there were banked masses of threatening cloud, upon which, by a curious atmospheric effect, the outline of the mountains was reflected. The lightning played in rapidly-succeeding flashes. It was evident that one of those terrible tempests peculiar to the district was impending.

Hester felt no fear, though it was impossible that, even by walking at her utmost speed, she could reach home before the deluge broke. She had no impulse of self-preservation; on the contrary, a reckless excitement possessed her, and it almost seemed to her heated fancy that the fury of the elements was in some way connected with her own fate.

She lingered on, and every instant it grew darker. She had a vivid sense of Mr. Durnford's nearness. But they had said that he was gone towards Knapp's

Cliff—miles from here. Well, she would go back. She knew of a deserted shepherd's hut by the river-side which she might perhaps reach in time.

She opened the iron gate. The first peal of thunder shook the rocks. When it was over she heard a rustling in the long grass, and a quick decisive step approaching the graveyard. The blood forsook Hester's face. She turned and saw a man—tall, broad-shouldered, vigorous-looking—advancing across the plateau. It was Mr. Durnford. He pushed open the gate, and accosted her.

“Mrs. Murgatroyd, you here!”

She did not answer at that moment, for the thunder came again, and while they waited she looked at his face, noting with secret joy how full it was of concern and agitation. His grey eyes, which were usually dreamy, looked now wild and

dilated, and she saw, in spite of his heavy moustache and brown beard, that his lower lip was quivering.

"You are alone, and without any wraps, and in that thin dress. The storm will be upon us presently, and what can I do?"

"Nothing," said Hester, quietly. She had the feeling now that it did not matter what became of her. He was by her side.

"What could have induced you to wander so far from home? The storm has been threatening since four o'clock."

"You have been further than I."

"Oh, it is of no consequence what happens to me. But I don't know how I can shelter you. We could not cross the river to get to the old sheep-station. The question is, what are we to do?"

"Stay here and get wet," replied Hester, recklessly; "this is not the first

time I have been caught in a storm. I rather like the sensation though I am not a poet. Doesn't this inspire you, Mr. Durnford? The lightning is very fine over Tieryboo."

He uttered an exclamation of dismay, and drew closer to her. Their eyes met. Again the thunder clanged, rumbling among the mountains and swelling loud again. Above the protracted roll might be heard a roar in the distance like the sound of a rushing cyclone. A keen wind had risen, bearing with it an icy chill. It was whirling about the dead leaves and laying low the grass and saplings. The limbs of the gum-trees writhed. The earth, which till now seemed to have held her breath as one dead, became in a minute alive and panting.

Durnford hastily stripped himself of his coat, wrapped it round Hester and

drew her by the hand outside the inclosure.

"Don't you hear the hail?" he said, hoarsely. "If you are not afraid, I am frightened for you. But I have thought of something. There's a cave in those rocks above us. It's a short, sharp climb. We must do it quickly; it's our only chance. Come!"

But, though she trembled at the sound of the hail, Hester clung with curious hardihood to the wild upland.

"Mr. Durnford," she said, falteringly, "I can't climb. Let us stay here."

"Impossible! I will carry you. Come!"

She resisted no longer. Holding each other's hands, they ran along the plateau and began to scale the hill behind it. He hurled himself forward, clearing with one arm a way through the scrubby



undergrowth; while, with the other, he drew her upwards. In the intervals between the thunder-crashes they could hear the distant roar, swelling in volume and almost drowning the cries of birds and reptiles and the stampede of frightened kangaroos; while, glancing backwards for a second, they beheld, like a leaden curtain obscuring the landscape, the on-rushing sheet of hail. Panting and bruised from their stumbles over the stones which at every footfall were sent rolling into the valley below, Hester and Durnford paused for a moment to survey what remained of the ascent. By the forked flashes they saw the bristling cliff close above them; and at its base, scarcely visible from the knoll below, was a triangular fissure in the mountain, hollowed out at the sides, and affording space for a family of native bears to dwell

comfortably, or for two human beings to crouch in perfect security from the tempest.

But a slanting precipice, jagged and tapestried with prickly creepers, intervened between them and the refuge they sought. The gloom was as of night; and, save for the lightning which every instant played round the mountain's grim outlines, they could scarcely have seen where to cling for foothold. Hester had relinquished Durnford's hand, leaving him free, while she tried to scramble in his wake. But her foot slipped upon the crimson blossoms of the *kennedia* and she fell, uttering a cry of helplessness. The thorns of the stouter creepers to which she held tore her fingers. By the aid of a sapling gum-tree Durnford had swung himself higher; now, stooping, he put his arm round Hester, and, by an

exertion of strength only possible to one trained to athletic feats, lifted her to the ledge upon which he stood: thus, by three or four desperate efforts he reached the foot of the cliff. There was not a moment to be lost; the earth shook beneath them, and a few yards from where they stood, the advancing hail beat with the force of iron against the rocks. One leap. A vivid flash illuminated the wall before them; and he bore her almost fainting into the cleft.

A rock wallabi, startled from its lair, flew past them. Durnford drew Hester further into the cave. It was larger than they had imagined, and in the centre they could stand upright. The rain was now descending in torrents, and the air had become icy cold. Hester shivered, and he folded his coat more closely round her. At intervals they could see each

other's pallid faces; but in that awful din it would have been impossible for human voice to make itself heard. But there was no need of speech. His eyes revealed what his lips might not have dared to utter. A wild delight thrilled Hester. She knew that he loved her.

At the height of the storm, when simultaneously, flash blinded and roar deafened, Durnford put out his hand and clasped that of Hester. They held each other thus like children to whom contact gives a sense of safety and comfort, and yet with that deeper consciousness which set the hearts of both wildly beating.

## CHAPTER V.

## LOVE TALK.

THE violence of the storm was abated. The hail no longer clattered against the cliff; it lay piled in jagged masses at the mouth of the fissure. The sharp thunder-claps had ceased; and there was only a muttering as of spent wrath, rising and falling among the more distant mountains. The storm was flying westward; and in the east, towards which the cleft opened, the sky was blue again. A pale grey light, like that preceding dawn, suffused the valley, and the drowned hills rose up once more clear and beautiful.

The joyous gurgling of innumerable new-born rills mingled with the beat of steadily falling rain. The insects had begun to hum again. Nature's aspect was now benignant; the desire of the earth was satisfied.

Hester withdrew her hand from Durnford's clasp. She felt faint and dizzy. It was with difficulty that she moved to the mouth of the cave. There she sank upon a projecting ledge and leaned her head against the lichen-covered rock. A drop of rain trickled through a crevice above, and wetted her forehead. The coldness of it awoke her, as it were from a dream of death and Heaven. She had been, it seemed to her, so near both. And Durnford's touch seemed still to cling about her like something living and insistent.

He came close to her.

“You know that I love you,” he said.

It was the supreme moment; and she knew now, that, though she had never consciously pictured it to herself, the anticipation of it had been for months underlying her existence. In the re-action from her excitement she trembled like a frightened child; and, covering her face with her hands, wept softly, with joy rather than with sorrow. In love, joy and sadness interblend so closely that to separate them is an impossibility. He waited by her side till she was calm again, and the tears no longer oozed from between her fingers. Drawing down her hands, he held them against his breast. She was forced to bend towards him and to meet his eyes, in which an intense, grave yearning was pent. The bright steadfastness of his gaze inspired her with a feeling of self-abandonment, and of entire

reliance upon his truth and power to make her life beautiful and happy. She did not think of responsibility incurred by him or herself—or if for a second, womanlike, it struck her that he might be hurtfully affected, she thrust away the idea. His words seemed to have plunged her into a delicious stupor. She knew that he was speaking again, that he was telling her of his love; and his voice sounded strange and sweet. Then the thought flooded her mind like the echo of a past pain. This would not last: and she cried out, “You will not go away? You will not leave me?”

“No,” he answered, “I will not leave you till you bid me go.”

“But, you were—you meant to accept the appointment,” she said, hesitatingly.

“You heard ——?” he began, starting as if with compunction. “It was base of



me to let it come upon you so suddenly—  
I should have spoken to you. But ——”

“I understand,” she said. “You—it  
would have hurt me.”

“This is all wrong,” he exclaimed,  
passionately. “The other would have  
been most just to you.”

“It is hard—to be just,” she said,  
slowly.

“It is impossible, if justice be to keep  
silence.”

“No,” she answered, “I think there’s  
one compact we ought to make—that is,  
to be open with each other—even if we  
are to be parted.”

“We can’t be parted. Love has rights  
that won’t be gainsaid. How can one  
fight against human nature?”

“Oh,” she said, sadly, “we ought not  
to think like that. We ought to think  
of what is our duty.”

"Duty does not command us to turn away from affection which is helpful. I can do you good by staying here? I can make your life happier?"

"I don't know if it would be right," she said, hesitatingly.

"Don't you see?" he said. "The thing was done when I told you that I loved you. What might have been right a little while ago would be wrong now. A word makes all the difference—a look even—and there's a bond it would be wicked to break."

"I did not intend to speak of myself but of you," she said. "I ought not to take your love. If it were not for me you would marry ——"

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed. "Do you suppose that such a possibility as my marriage with any one else has ever occurred to me since I knew you? I

shall never marry. I'm too poor, for one thing. Do I do you any good?" he asked, suddenly.

"Yes," she answered looking up into his face.

"Then that's all that matters."

"Oh!" she said, "a great deal matters besides that."

His face saddened. He was silent for a few moments.

"You are right," he said, quietly. "There's a great deal besides. Things that it would be folly to shut our eyes to."

"What things?"

"The fret—of a doubtful position."

She moved a little uneasily.

"You mean that we cannot be open about our feeling for each other?"

"Yes—the necessity to guard looks and

words—so that a false construction should not be put upon our friendship.”

“Do you find it hard?” she asked, and flushed a little. “I never thought of that.”

“I am bound to think of it, for your sake. Yes, it’s hard; sometimes the effort to hold myself in has been almost too great. But perhaps it won’t be so bad now.”

“What other things?” she asked.

“There’s the danger of loving each other too much; and, perhaps, by-and-bye, the misery of separation. But we won’t think of that, or of anything melancholy.”

“No—not now.”

“We cannot give each other our lives, but sympathy should count for a great deal; and the happiness we have taken

ought to counter-balance the pain that is inevitable."

"There must be pain," she said, slowly.  
"You have thought over it?"

"Yes," he replied. "I have considered possibilities and difficulties as they might affect you—not myself—oh no! How have I deserved this happiness? But, you—your position is hard. I feared that in speaking I might make it more so. I felt that it would perhaps be more manly to leave you without putting all to the test. I believed that you would understand. But, you see, this has come without our willing it: and, if there's suffering, the pain that guards against baseness may be a good we should cherish. There could never be baseness for us."

She drew back, loosing her hands.  
His words seemed to open vistas in her

imagination. She exclaimed suddenly, "Oh, I can do you no good—I ought not to let you love me!"

"That has passed beyond your control—or mine," said Durnford, triumphantly. "It seems to me that there is but one great compelling fact in all the world—the fact that we love each other. Don't be sad," he added, in clear, tender tones; "there can be no gladness for me if you are sorry; and I am so full of happiness."

"I cannot be sorry," said Hester, very low, "but there are things I see—you know—we can never be married." She looked at him straightly as she spoke; her face was very pale and quiet. "I shall cripple your life. It would be like wasting everything upon a shadow. You would be sorry, after a time, that you had ever known me."

He looked at her with troubled appeal.

“You don’t really believe that; you could not say it if you had any conception of how, ever since I began to care for you, you have filled my life. *You* cripple it! Why, you have lifted me on wings. You have given me a soul. If it were my fate to be shut up in a dungeon for the rest of my existence I would not shorten a day of it, for my soul would be with yours, and every hour I should say to myself ‘Hester loves me.’”

“I do love you,” said Hester, with grave sweetness. They moved towards each other and kissed tremblingly. No further protest was made. In the minds of both there was a kind of awe, and upon their happiness a shadow of trouble rested. Neither could have analysed this consciousness, but it was deep in both their hearts. A barrier had been passed. They stood in an unknown region full of

glamour and mystery, which yet they hardly dared explore. It was safer to turn back towards the past, and view it, transformed as it seemed by the enchanted light which now illuminated it. Scenes were retraced, and questions asked—brokenly at first—the “whys” and “whens” to which lovers’ early confidences tentatively shape themselves. And then they said, how wonderful had been the combinations of circumstance—how marvellous the interwindings of the threads! How strange was this unexpected meeting among the hills! How manifest the interposition of Fate!

“It was like a wild dream—the being alone together in the midst of the storm,” Hester said, and her voice quavered. She looked at him with a solemn pleading, as though asking him whether she ought to check the outpourings of her heart.



"I had been wishing—I was so wretched," she faltered.

"Tell me everything," he said. "You are right. That's the one compact we must make—perfect openness. It is so much better that we should each know what has been in the mind of the other—even if it gives pain."

"It is all different now," said Hester; "there is not that terrible separateness—that lonely misery. This afternoon when I left home it did not seem to matter what happened to me. I wanted to be alone, where no one could see or hear me."

"My poor darling," he said.

"I thought you had guessed, and that you despised me. It came upon me like a great shock when Gretta said that you were going away, though I had been unhappy for a long time. But to-day—I thought that you would never

know — that we should neither of us know ——”

“You had been unhappy for a long time,” repeated Durnford, with a sort of groan.

“I did not know at first that it was because I cared for you,” said Hester, speaking with the simplicity of a child.

“You mustn’t think I was always sad. At first it was as though something had come into my life which made it fuller and more complete. I felt gayer over my work, and the days did not drag so heavily, and I liked wandering over the hills and thinking of you—I did not think then—of this,” she added, hastily, and coloured.

“Dear heart of mine,” murmured Durnford.

“I seemed to be always seeing your eyes,” continued Hester. “All sorts of things used to come into my mind which

I wanted to say to you. And, when we did talk, I added so much afterwards in thought to our conversation that it was difficult to tell how much had been said and how much imagined."

"Oh," he said, "I know that feeling."

"But it did not matter much, for I was certain that you understood a great deal without words."

"And I also," said Durnford. "It used to puzzle me. In the evening when I sat alone at my work the sense of your presence was often so vivid with me that I would turn to you for sympathy, feeling that in spirit at least you were by my side."

"Do you remember?" began Hester, and broke off smiling—half in joy, half in melancholy. "It is foolish to go back to such little things, but it is pleasant to think of them. Do you remember one day when we sat by the creek, and you

were reading a translation of Richter's *Fruit, Flower, and Thorn Pieces*, how your voice trembled at the place where Natalie gives Firmian the green rose-branch, saying, 'When they are young, they hardly prick at all'? Natalie was right, I think. It is when the roses are gathered in full bloom that the thorns pierce deepest."

"Well," he said, smiling, "I asked you, I remember, whether you would rather that the roses should remain always closed buds and you answered 'Yes.' That reply decided me to leave you. You did not guess that day by the river, how near I was to self-betrayal."

"I was thinking," said Hester, and there was a note of suppressed passion in her voice, "of the misery which comes through mistakes and destroyed illusions — of how one clutches greedily at what

one believes to be happiness, and finds it only dust and ashes. That was what happened to me when I was very young. And so you avoided me?" she added, hurriedly, not allowing him to comment upon what she had hinted at. "Every day I looked forward to the evening, and when evening came it was the same story. 'Mr. Durnford was writing and would not come.' We did not know then that you were a poet. Though when Mr. Gustavus Blaize told us of his great discovery, that you were the author of *Soul and Star*, it seemed to me that I must have felt it all the time I was reading the book."

"Ah," said Durnford, "I had written my heart out, and every line of the poem held a message for you. You have inspired all in it that's worth anything. How curious but true," he added, thought-

fully, "the intuitive way in which a poet's writing corresponds with the nature of the woman he is writing about! It's no conscious process in the poet's mind; but I am sure the instinct is a truthful one. Whenever your nature puzzles me a little, and I want to understand you better, I look at the sonnets I have written to you." He laughed shortly. "I cursed Gustavus Blaize for his meddling. Of course I believed that you would guess my secret, and resent being gibbeted in that fashion. But you were so sweet, so tender. . . . I ought to have gone away after our meeting—again down by the graveyard there. You recollect—the clear winter's day and the rock-lilies out, and the poinsettia flaming against the railings. And you wore a bunch of hoya in your belt. You dropped it. I have the withered thing now."

To Hester this backward wandering was sweet. But it filled him with agitation of which he was half afraid, and his inward vision of bewildering possibilities forced him to hold his utterances in check. He had paused abruptly, and went closer to the cave's mouth, his face turned from her. The rain was still pouring, and a blustering wind swept in gusts down the valley and beat against the cliff, driving before it fallen leaves and snapped-off branches, the *débris* left by the storm. Above the sound of wind and rain rose the rushing of the lately swollen river.

With a sigh Hester stirred. "Look!" said she, pointing to the heavens, which were now irradiated by a gleam from the west, "the sun will soon be setting, and we are a long way from home."

"Oh!" cried Durnford, passionately, "to think that there is this world of

solitude, and not one corner of it where we can dwell alone together! No; we may not leave our refuge yet. There's a moon to-night; it will light us down the precipice. And I cannot let you expose yourself to this drenching rain. The wind is driving it away. A little while, and we shall be safe in starting homeward."

Hester silently acquiesced, and remained still waiting for him to come back to her side. Presently he turned, and the thought which had been racking him burst forth fiercely. "There *is* hope," he said; "the hope of your freedom!"



## CHAPTER VI.

## HESTER'S STORY.

HESTER started, and exclaimed, shuddering slightly, "Oh, don't. You must not think of that—it is wicked. One might wish, and the wish would be murder in thought. If you knew how I have prayed to be delivered from that temptation."

He became calm instantly, and, seating himself beside her, took her hand in his. "Forgive me," he said; "we will never speak of it again."

"You do not know the story of my marriage?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Very imperfectly."

"You ought to know. I was much to blame. I deserved partly what came afterwards." She turned her head away, and he saw that a tear rolled down her cheek.

"You were very young," he said, hesitating, partly from ignorance of a subject which was a forbidden one at Doondi and partly from dread of setting loose a flood of sorrowful recollection.

"Barely seventeen. But—I will tell you everything if you care to listen."

"I long to know your sad history and to comfort you. But do not speak of it if it would pain you."

She made a quick gesture. "I want you to know."

"Did you love him?" asked Durnford, suddenly, and a moment later was angry

with himself for having asked the question. She waited some seconds before answering.

“Yes,” she said, at length, “I suppose that I must have loved him or I could not have gone through all that I did in order to marry him. I disobeyed my father and cut myself off from my own people for his sake. But it was not the sort of love that stands the test of nearness. It was fed on dreams, ignorance, and self-will. You don’t know what a romantic girl I was—my head stuffed full of novels and poetry, and all kinds of nonsense. And then, I daresay we weren’t very carefully brought up. I ran wild ; Mollie was the quiet one and the good housekeeper. She got on well with father. You know he is very odd in many ways. He’ll never give in about anything. If it hadn’t been for

my trouble and my coming back to him like a beggar I know he would not have forgiven me all my life." Hester paused and laughed sadly. "My training wasn't much excuse for me, however. See how admirably Mollie has turned out. She didn't care for novels."

Durnford laughed sadly.

"I'm a believer in the doctrine of original sin," Hester went on. "I am sure that under no circumstances could Mollie have behaved as I did; nor could she have the feelings that I have sometimes—still."

Hester sighed. Presently she continued,

"I was solitary in my ways and fond of imagining myself into dramatic situations. I used to like wandering about the bush by myself—just as I do now. He was employed as superintendent to some navvies who were at work on a telegraph line near us—that was in Victoria: we

have been living on the Eura only about ten years—I used to meet him in my walks—and then he would tell me stories of his adventures. He had been in America. His life had been a very wild one; it sounded unlike anything I had ever heard of; it roused my interest and curiosity. Then he asked me to marry him. I remember that I went about that time for a week to Melbourne, and saw ‘The Lady of Lyons’ acted one night. It impressed my imagination as nothing else has ever done. I felt like Pauline; he was Claude Melnotte. Did I tell you that he was beneath me in birth? and, of course, he had no money. We were poor too, but my father always thought a great deal about our being well-born, and expected us to marry gentlemen. I disliked all the squatters I saw; they seemed to me so common-

place. Lance Murgatroyd was different; though in many ways he was like a working-man, he had read a good deal, and could sing love-songs, to queer, wild Indian tunes. He was handsome too, with bold black eyes, and a reckless dare-devil kind of manner which I thought then very grand and fascinating. I fancied that there would be something heroic in leading a rough life with him—in sacrificing my prospects for love of him. My meetings with him were all clandestine—you will see from this that I could not have been a nice-minded girl ——”

“You were as innocent as you were ignorant,” exclaimed Durnford; “and it was upon this that the scoundrel traded.”

“At last they were found out,” she went on, “and my father forbade me ever to see him again. Well I—I ran.

a way with him ; and we were married Then came the awakening. Oh, it was bitter!—bitter!—every day, every hour bringing some fresh revelation. All the veil of worship and romance torn down, and underneath, coarseness which revolted me. I grew to dread being alone with him—to dread hearing him speak.”

Hester’s voice faltered. Again Durnford tenderly besought her not to recall what must be painful to her.

“No ; I’d rather tell you . . . . When he saw that I shrank from him it got worse—he became rude and violent. He used to say that he wanted to break my spirit ; and he taunted me, and coerced me, making me do things I disliked till I felt like a mad thing. I didn’t think of duty or of my obligations as a wife. I used to say things to him which exasperated him. I never tried to gain any

influence over him by means of his affection for me, for he did care for me after his fashion. It was an affection which repelled me and made me hate him. All I wished was to keep him at arm's length. That made him savage, reckless. He took to drinking, and then he began to beat me."

Durnford groaned. His grasp of Hester's hand tightened. His eyes were fixed upon her face in dumb, indignant pity.

"I don't know why I tell you all this," she said. "There's no use in making you unhappy."

"Go on," he said.

"It lasted for two years, and then I could bear it no longer." Her voice became tremulous again. "I couldn't bear to think that my child would grow up to hear such language and — I had a baby; the little thing that is buried



there"—she motioned towards the graveyard. "One night when he was lying drunk I left him. I went out into the bush with my baby in my arms. I put a letter beside him in which I said that I hated him, and that chains shouldn't drag me back to that life of misery and degradation. . . . Often when I stand looking at the stars I think of that night, and of how I guided myself by the Southern Cross in the direction of a station not far from where we lived. The people there drove me to a township, and at last I got to my father, and he took me in and sheltered me."

There were tears in Durnford's eyes when she ceased speaking. With the gesture of a child who has told her miserable tale and asks for sympathy she put her cheek against his shoulder.

"See how I love you. See how I trust

you," she said. "I tell you everything. No; there's more still to tell. Perhaps the worst, for it is a shame on the name I bear. Looking back, I see that things might have been different if I had been different—if I had tried to make him better. I see now that there was good in him, and I am sure that he loved me. If I had had strength and courage, and had accepted my lot, perhaps in time the doing of one's duty might have brought some sort of satisfaction; and he would have been saved from what happened after I had deserted him. My going away and the drink drove him furious. The story was in all the newspapers—I read it. Even now I can remember it almost word for word. They were drinking in a public-house. One of his companions on the line jeered at him for having married a lady. My husband drew a knife upon

the man and killed him. He was tried for manslaughter and sentenced to seven years' penal servitude. His term was prolonged because of his attempting to escape. It expired a year ago. That day when I promised to be your friend I had heard the news of his release."

Hester paused. There fell silence between them ; but it was silence fraught with the deepest meaning. Again, Durnford rose from her side, and stood looking forth at the wreck and havoc which the storm had made. It seemed to him typical of the story which had just been told him. At that moment a driving mass of clouds parted, and through the rift, the westering sun sent down a golden ray. This gleam irradiating the mountains—and bringing, as it were, promise of renewed vigour to the torn and bleeding trees—struck him also as symbolic. Not for ever

was Hester doomed to drag on this maimed weighted existence. A wrench, and her bonds might be broken. Thoughts welled up in his breast which seemed to demand a complete readjustment of his moral attitude ere they could be translated into words. The injustice of Fate inflamed him to a paroxysm of rebellion. With eager straining, he mentally scanned the back-stretching vistas of her miserable youth. The more hopeless and exceptional her lot, the greater justification did it offer for an overleaping of conventional obstacles.

He turned, paced the cave hurriedly for some moments, then halted before her, love-words burning upon his lips. Her full gaze rested upon his face, and perceived clearly the signs of inward tumult and conflict. Her fine instinct realised, though it did not comprehend, the situation.

With a woman's shrinking from the fiercer phases of man's nature she sought to avert the impending crisis. Rising from the ledge of rock, she held out to him his coat which he had wrapped round her, and which she had taken off upon entering the cave.

"I don't want it now," she said, quietly. "I'm not wet or cold, Put it on, and let us go home."

He obeyed her mechanically.

"Let us go," she repeated in the same gentle voice. "It has stopped raining."

"Ought we to go? *Must* we go?" he asked, dreamily. "Can't we stay a little longer?"

"They will be sending out search-parties," she answered, with trembling voice.

She moved into the interior of the cave where her hat had been thrown. The darkness seemed to swallow her up. He felt as though some taint in him had

repelled her. The fear of spiritual antagonism between them chilled his hot impulse, and wrought in him a sudden revulsion of feeling. He approached her, and brought her back to the light. They stood hands clasped, and their eyes communed wordlessly. At last she said simply, "You have made me very happy. I can never be lonely again."

The little speech, and all the trust in it, brought them once more very near to each other. His being vibrated in more noble harmonies. This was not the moment for analysis; but what scope has the poetic faculty if it be not infinitely analytical? It was characteristic of Durnford to say,

"We will be happy, as happy as those who feel deeply can be in this painful world. The relation between us may be one of the most beautiful and poetic that

ever existed between poet and woman. Above all, we will consecrate to each other our best selves. That other self will be the guardian angel to each—and not alone in its mission. Wherever two persons are concerned, there are always three souls—the man's, the woman's, and the soul of Eternal Right. The true soul in us will distinguish between the Eternal Right and the Conventional Right. We can fearlessly bow to that judgment."

They parted hands, but kissed not again. There was to him a deep meaning in this reticence. He would not at that moment let his eyes meet hers. They cast a lingering glance backward into the cave, henceforth a sacred temple, and then out upon the chastened landscape. The valley lay in shadow, but the hills were bathed in golden light, like the smile after weeping; and the wind had died down.

## CHAPTER VII.

## AMONG BARBARIANS.

"MRS. BLUEBEARD'S mamma thought it a fine thing to be mother-in-law to a respectable three-tailed bashaw. Well, there are advantages—in Australia—to be gained from having married the daughter of a rabid oppositionist."

The speaker was Captain Clephane; the young lady he addressed, his niece Isabel Gauntlett.

"What does that mean, Uncle Jack?"

"Why, on the strength of Duncan Reay's enmity to the Eura River Railway, I have got an order from the



Minister for Works to the effect that we are to be dropped at five o'clock to-morrow morning before the slip-rails of Ferguson's home-paddock. Now make yourself comfortable, Isabel, and try to imagine you are travelling by the Great Western."

"That's not very easy, Uncle Jack."

"By George! no—not while we are in a vapour-bath, with these confounded mosquitoes pitching into us. However, we shall get rid of them when we have passed through the sheoak swamps. In the meantime I'll see what my swag can produce; Persian insect-powder, and a wisp of old Jerry's mane,—or, better still, a lump of smoking gass-tree out of the station-master's office. Hi, Beamish!"

The train had stopped before a roadside station, standing in a clearing, against a background of shivering swamp-

oak trees. Except for a gaunt red-faced man,—who in deference to his position wore a coat with a badge upon it slung over one shoulder, but whose chest was bare, and his sleeves tucked up over the elbow,—the rough platform was perfectly vacant: neither passengers nor goods were turned out, nor did the official appear to think there was any necessity for shouting the name of the station.

“You’re more than an hour behind time. I thought you was another special and that they’d knocked off the reg’lar,” said he to the guard, in a tone of indolent banter.

“Oh, we only does that when the Government members ain’t up to the scratch, or when the Ministers want an outing, or when the Premier’s daughter gets married and must have a special to

take her honeymooning up the mountains," rejoined the guard.

"Well, it's a thankless business finding fault with one's bread and butter, but old Duncan Reay was jolly well right; and, if this 'ere line wasn't made for the convenience of a few cursed squatters, why I'm damned "

"Look out, Beamish!" said a voice from one of the carriage-windows, the same which had called to him previously. "Here's one of the obnoxious crew, and on his way up from spreeing in Leichardt's Town. What do you think of that?"

"Good evening, Cap'en Clephane," said Beamish, advancing to the compartment. "Well, and I says that you deserve your spree; and I always says, cap'en, that *for* a damned squatter, you be's one of the hardest-working chaps I know.

It's not that I'm agen the squatters; and if you was to stand, cap'en, I'd give you my vote. But *be* a Liberal or else be a blasted Conservative. Don't you go mixing the two like this 'ere Ministry. With them it's 'you stick by me and I'll stick by you,' and hang the country."

"I'm sorry you have such a bad opinion of your legislators," said Clephane. "It'll be a satisfaction to you to hear, Beamish, that there was a row in the House last night, and that it's reported we shall soon have a change of Ministry. But just let me remind you, there's a lady in here fresh from England; and she didn't know before she started that we made railways out in Australia for the convenience of mosquitoes. I see you have got some grass-tree burning in there. Give us a tin of it like a good fellow."

"All right, Cap'en. I beg the lady's pardon, I thought it was Mrs. Clephane or Miss Reay; and they know our ways." Beamish hurried off, but presently returned bearing a bucket containing some smoking peat-like fuel, which emitted a resinous and not unpleasant odour. This he placed on the floor of the carriage, and the fumes mounted upwards, creating at first a commotion among the buzzing mosquitoes.

"Good night, Cap'en," said Beamish. "Glad to hear you are going in for a northern station; you'll never make much out of Tieryboo, though you needn't be afraid of Free Selectors *there*. Good-night, miss. I hope you'll like the bush." The signal was given and the train moved slowly on.

"Phew!" said Captain Clephane. "That's better. How are you now, Isabel?"

"Pretty well, thank you, uncle. I can't say that I feel much like going down to Devonshire. And to think that it is nearly Christmas time, and that they are all shivering at Heatherleigh! I never felt so hot in my life."

"It's very good for you, my dear—just what you have been sent here for. But you mustn't forget, though the thermometer is over 90°, that you are under an open window, and that you have got lungs." He unstrapped a valise, and drew from it a light rug and a whisk made out of a bundle of horsehair tied to a whip-handle, which he began to flourish over his companion's head. "Now just wrap my poncho round you, and I will put Jerry's tail into requisition till the mosquitoes get a bit stupefied. Poor Jerry! He was my best horse. Killed by a snake-bite!"

"Uncle," said the girl, touching the handle, "what a sweet smell! What is it?"

"Myall wood, my dear. One that I carved in my new chum days ready for the thong. A new chum is no longer a new chum when he can plait a stock-whip."

Captain Clephane was a bronzed, handsome man of about forty. In appearance he was an odd combination of the squatter and the hussar. He had little English ways, a certain *timbre* of voice, and small niceties of demeanour, which clashed with a rough-and-ready manner that it was easy to see had been assumed with the Crimean shirt, home-made coat, leather belt and pouch, and soft felt puggareed hat. He seemed to look upon life with a dramatic eye and to enjoy playing his present part of settler in the Antipodes.

No tropical night could have been warmer than this upon which Isabel Gauntlett made acquaintance with the Australian bush. The air was steamy and oppressive, and occasional flashes of sheet-lightning in the distance, though the sky was perfectly clear overhead, told of impending thunderstorms. The train crept slowly through marshy grounds, misty with exhalations, and thickly overgrown with sheoak and wattle. Strange odours arose, and wild sounds, and the buzz of innumerable insects. The cries of curlew and morepork, and the gurgling *coo-roo coo-r-r-roo* of the swamp-pheasant, struck unfamiliarly upon Isabel's ear. A bright moon shed broken reflections upon the stagnant pools and imparted a ghostly aspect to the white-limbed trees which stretched out in eternal vistas. High above the vast solitude were set brilliant



southern constellations new to the English girl—the Southern Cross, Aldebaran, the Scorpion, Orion, turned upside-down.

“What a strange, desolate world!” exclaimed Miss Gauntlett, drawing in her head after a comprehensive survey from the carriage-window, “No lights, except stars and glowworms. No sign of human being or habitation, nothing but spectral trees. Is it an enchanted forest, Uncle Jack? And good Heavens!” as a prolonged and melancholy howling rent the air, “did you ever hear anything so eerie! it might be a banshee wailing. Are you sure it is quite canny?”

“Dingoes,” said Captain Clephane, who always preferred to use local nomenclature. “There’s nothing distinctly uncanny in the Eura district except Debbil, Debbil, the Bunyip, and Jinks in her tan-

trums; and I daresay that you will find an intimate connection between the three. Come, you will only see everlasting stretches of sheoak and gum-trees. Lie down and let me cover you up and send you to sleep."

"Oh it is all so new and delightful to me. I like the loneliness and immensity of the bush. Though I've only been two days in Australia I am deeply impressed by the bigness of things in general."

"Dearest Isabel," didactically remarked Captain Clephane, "the Australians are a fine race. They pride themselves upon their bigness—metaphorically speaking. There is nothing paltry about this country—it wasn't made for inch-rule measurements. You will observe that we are decidedly casual. Life is casual. Society is casual. A man may be a reputed millionaire; but if there happens to be

a drought, a crisis, a fall in wool, or a visitation of pleuro-pneumonia, he will be a beggar not many months later. If people don't care to earn their grub we are so openhanded that they can always get it by loafing. A few miles more or less don't seriously affect one's landmarks. Where there isn't a bed handy there's bound to be a blanket. One isn't particular in counting a few stray head of cattle; and, though we can all swear a rounder in the stockyard or on the drafting-camp, as a rule we are a happy-go-lucky peaceable lot. Now, as I hinted before, there are night-dews in Australia, and you have come out here to have a delicate lung patched up."

"I feel cured already, Uncle Jack. Three months at sea have made a different girl of me."

Nevertheless, Isabel Gauntlett sighed

softly as she turned from the window. The sigh was like an echo of some past trouble, and seemed rather a note of relief than of pain. It was in harmony with her expression of grave serenity—of almost wistful resignation. This spirituality of countenance set her above the ordinary type of English girl, under which she might otherwise have been classed, for her features, though fairly well chiselled, had no very special claim to beauty. Her complexion was singularly clear, though rather pale; her eyes were blue, and looked larger than they in reality were, from the violet stains beneath the lower lids. She had the consumptive physique, which undoubtedly possesses a charm of its own, differing again in a marked degree from the anæmic type admired by the modern school. Her mouth was pretty and sen-

sitive, and her hair a pale flaxen. The face might have been insipid but for the darkness of brows and lashes.

Her dress was simple but artistically made, all its appointments dainty even to costliness. She took off her hat, covered her fair hair with a scarf of black lace, and lay down upon the carriage-seat, which, with the aid of rugs and with his valise for a pillow, Captain Clephane had turned into a comfortable couch. He still agitated Jerry's tail, remarking cheerfully that the brutes were beginning to settle upon the ceiling.

"Uncle Jack, you needn't do that. I must get accustomed to mosquitoes, mustn't I?"

"Not if you stay by the Eura. Mountain air is not favourable to the propagation of the species. Now, I'm going to talk, just to send you off to

sleep. You needn't listen or answer. My dear Isabel, they are always telling me that I'm not a practical man. It's a sort of fixed axiom; it was grounded, I believe, upon a scheme I had for penning the wild pigs on Tieryboo, fattening 'em, and sending 'em to the Sydney market—the whole thing miscarried because of the difficulty of getting them there. Then I had a plan for turning the marsupials into a profitable speculation; that didn't do either. Well, perhaps I had better admit that I am apt to be carried away by first impressions. My first distinct impressions of the Eura district were absence of mosquitoes and magnificence of scenery, inaccessible peaks, splendid rocky gorges, brilliancy of colouring—for Australia—which was a relief to the eye after the saltbush plains and mangrove flats of the coast-station, where I spent the days of

my new-chum-hood. A winter sunset, the sight of a flame-tree on the borders of a scrub, and—tell it not in Gath—the quantity of wild duck in the river, decided my fate. Tieryboo was for sale. I had five thousand pounds to my credit at the bank. In vain the wise men pointed out to me that Tieryboo would fatten pigs but not cattle. I couldn't tear myself from the spot. I bought it. I married Duncan Reay's daughter. I've climbed every mountain within reach; I've botanized, discovered gold, coal, opals—always with this drawback—the mines hadn't working capabilities. I have had no end of sport and amusement in shooting wild horses and running in scrubbers; but I am bound to confess that I have not found it a profitable investment. What does it matter? I'm very happy. And think of the incalculable benefit one

derives from being in a healthy moral atmosphere! Pure ozone, compared with the fetid breath of London society." Jerry's tail waved to and fro with redoubled vigour. "Dissipation, debt, philandering, false appearance, false sentiment, sham morality, froth, and slavery. That's life over there. Here, a man is a man, and doesn't require a tailor. Why, Mollie cuts out my shirts and I buy my breeches ready made at a Cheap-jack store in Wyeroo. Are you listening, Isabel?"

"Yes, uncle; go on—I am very much interested."

"That won't do, you know. You must try and get drowsy. As for pleasure, if one considers the subject philosophically—I have been thinking it out—it's a mere matter of comparison. Look at what our fellows used to go through—no end of



discomfort—mosquitoes and all, in Norway—for the sake of sport.” Here Jerry’s tail maintained a regular and soothing motion. “Out here, sport is a mode of livelihood—that’s all the difference. I can’t see why a day after cattle should not be just as exciting as a day in Leicestershire. It’s purely the association of ideas. . . . No, hang me if it is, though,” added Captain Clephane, abruptly changing his tone, while Jerry’s tail performed certain saltatory movements in the air. “A fellow riding to the meet in his pink coat and immaculate tops, feeling his horse under him, thorough-bred stock, veins quivering, ready for action, *does* range a little higher in the scale of creation than the stockman whose nag has been run up from the paddock by a black-boy.” Clephane heaved a deep sigh. “How well I remember the Market Har-

borough meet, the day after the hunt ball! That was the last one I went to. The old-fashioned straggling village; the hounds panting on the green; carriages driving up in all directions. Gordon Creagh piloting the Empress; all the men one knew, full of chaff about the night before; the huntsman touching his cap; the master as keen as a fox; the pretty freshfaced women with their Wolmerhausen habits and breast-knots of violets. I can hear now the clink-clink of the horses' hoofs, and smell the fresh wintry smell! Then the stream up to the covert-side, where the hounds are opening; the sun shining out suddenly upon the pink coats, the canter across a furrowed field, the view-halloo! "He's off," and the wild dash over the grass fields. Isabel, what's the matter? Aren't you asleep yet?"

"No, Uncle Jack; I'm laughing.

There's such a marked contrast between the beginning of your tirade and the end. How about the hollow pleasures of an effete civilization and the glorious freedom of Australian life? I'm wide awake, and I want a map of the country."

"Easily given. Since we left Leichardt's Town this morning we have been travelling southward. In a few hours we shall be in the Eura River district; capital, the mining township of Wyeroo. At right angles from Wyeroo are Tieryboo, Doondi, my father-in-law's station, and Gundalunda, our halting-place to-morrow."

"Who lives at Gundalunda?" asked Isabel.

"Why, it belonged to a Victorian speculator, and was managed by an overseer till last year, when two partners—bachelors—bought it. One of them, Mr. Bertram

Wyatt, is on his way out from England ; the other, a really good specimen of an Australian-born youth—handsome, honest, manly, and fairly cultivated—will probably meet us at his own slip-rails to-morrow morning.”

“What is his name?”

“James Ferguson; but don’t indulge in any romantic speculations, for he is very much in love with my sister-in-law, Gretta Reay.”

“Ah, tell me about the Reays, Uncle Jack; and, first of all, what is the connection between Mr. Reay’s animosity to railways and your order from the Minister for Works?”

“Oh, he is rather a power after his fashion. The Government are afraid of him because, though he hardly opens his lips in private, he is great at stonewalling tactics and can talk against time by the

hour. He is a queer sort of fellow is Duncan Reay—a man of convictions which are invariably antagonistic to his private interests—a sort of Brutus who would deliver up his own son to the executioner. He was in the Ministry, but split with his colleagues upon the question of railway extensions, upon which, as you have heard, he entertained the same views as our friend Beamish. Old Reay joined the opposition, carried through a dead lock successfully. The business of the country was at a standstill; no supplies could be voted. The navvies got up a rebellion, and the civil servants sent him a deputation. However, he carried his point, stopped the branch line to Wyeroo, which would have considerably increased the value of his own property; then retired, like Cincinnatus, to his plough. Of late he has been maintaining a dig-

nified neutrality. Colonial politics, my dear Isabel, usually consist of two interests. The 'bloated squattocracy' represents Australian Conservatism. Just now, the situation is serious—the Government is making a last struggle. Very shortly there will be loaves and fishes for distribution. Mollie is hoping to see her father Minister for Works, and old Duncan is waiting in suppressed excitement for his country to demand his services."

"And his daughters? I am longing to see them."

"Hester Murgatroyd, the eldest, made an unfortunate marriage; we never talk about it. Her husband has been in prison for the last ten years, and was let out some months ago. Next comes my Mollie, and then, several years lower down, Gretta, who matches James Ferguson as a genuine Australian product—

most tyrannously pretty, and as little spoiled as human nature will permit, for she has always a string of admirers in tow to whom she makes herself impartially agreeable—a perfect type of the colonial belle—no pressure of conventionality to keep down the natural woman—no chaperonage forced upon her—quite capable of taking care of herself and aware of her own value, but as unaffected as a young lubra. She rode forty miles, to our second chief town, for a ball not long ago, having made her own dress and carried it in her swag; was the belle, of course, receiving with great equanimity the attentions of a certain young sprig of royalty on a tour of the world, in whose honour the entertainment had been given. The next day she rode home to set her milk and churn the butter. The servants had taken

French leave in her absence, and Gretta buckled to and did all the cooking for a week. Well, you will be able to make your own observations shortly. We are all located at Doondi till after Christmas: but you must curb your impatience, for Father-in-law and I have a little trip to make on business, and we shall leave you for a day or two at Gundalunda, under charge of Mrs. Blaize."

"And Mrs. Blaize?"

"Is James Ferguson's poor relation and housekeeper, a worthy soul, who tries to convert the blacks, and is the best hand at spicing rounds that I know. Mr. Blaize is storekeeper, carpenter, general indoors factotum. I daresay that he earns his grub, but I doubt whether Ferguson considers the question. Mrs. Blaize's first husband was brother to the late Mrs. Reay. This establishes



a sort of link between Doondi, Tieryboo, and Gundalunda; but the worst of the connection is that there's a brother-in-law, a certain Mr. Gustavus Blaize, Inspector of Public Works on the Eura, who is of an amorous tendency, and has a weakness for ladies' society and for long quotations, and is generally voted a most unmitigated bore. Now, Isabel, if you are not drowsy, I am: and we are getting out of mosquito land at last."

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## CHAPTER VIII.

## ISABEL'S DREAM.

CAPTAIN CLEPHANE stretched himself upon the opposite seat, and was soon dreaming of Leicestershire fields and London drawing-rooms; but Isabel Gauntlett lay still, wide-eyed, her mind a chaos of vague regret over the past, wonder at the present, and eager anticipation of the future.

She felt physically weary, but her nerves were quivering with excitement and new-born energy. The lethargy which for months had stifled all youthful

exuberance of spirits seemed now to have melted away like a cloud.

She was very young, scarcely more than twenty-one, yet a little while ago she had been face to face with death, and during her slow convalescence had almost persuaded herself that to be taken away would be the better part. But that mood had been born of sickness. What girl, however circumscribed her lot, wishes to die while the blood runs lustily in her veins ?

Now, in this soft southern night, laden with aromatic fragrance, and filled with the murmur of hidden life, as she was whirled on through regions unknown, and suggestive of the wild and unexpected, Isabel Gauntlett felt her being revived ; and her heart panted with the longing of a girl who sees for the first time opening

before her the world of romance and destiny.

She had led the chrysalis existence of an orphan, brought up under the roof of a half-sister, much older than herself, moving in the groove of respectable Philistinism, well married, and childless. Her surroundings had been those of a Devonshire manor-house, whose mistress was the lay rector and Lady Bountiful of the village, and she herself the lady's curate and aide-de-camp. Twice a year she had been taken to London to see the exhibitions and replenish her wardrobe, and she had visited at one or two country-houses. There her horizon closed.

She had been trained in a manner at which no one could have cavilled. Lady Hetherington, in offering her sister a home, had determined to do her duty to the uttermost. She could not be expected

to feel any absorbing affection for the child of a young and pretty stepmother, by whom she had been ousted from the command of her father's house ; but when at twelve years old the little girl was left an orphan with a fortune of which the interest would barely suffice for the allowance of a young lady supposed to dress fashionably and to mix in county society, Lady Hetherington generously volunteered to defray educational expenses ; and, as she was a woman with the strictest sense of duty, it is needless to say that, according to her lights, she fulfilled her obligations. Isabel had the best and most prosaic of governesses. Her intelligence was driven at a steady jog along the conventional path of feminine learning ; and if her imagination sighed after bolder tracks or flowery meads, it was at least docile and answered to the bit.

Lady Hetherington intended that her sister should marry satisfactorily, and was disappointed when at nineteen Isabel's lungs were pronounced delicate, and she was debarred from even the Exeter ball. Lady Hetherington did not approve of Plymouth as a scene of mild dissipation, for it was a garrison town, and likely to harbour detrimentials. An unusually severe winter brought on a serious attack, and the London faculty declared that to restore the young girl to health it was absolutely necessary that she should spend a year in a warm climate. Lady Hetherington was perplexed. It was impossible that Isabel should go alone to Madeira or the South of France. Both she and Sir Richard had a horror of living abroad. He would not give up his shooting; he was master of the hounds; and then, without her, what would become of

Heatherleigh? Besides, these would be but half measures. The doctors had advised a voyage across the equator. In her difficulty she bethought her of Jack Clephane, Isabel's maternal uncle, who had emigrated to Australia ten years before, when he had found it impossible to balance income and expenditure in England, had married there, and was at this crisis obviously his niece's best protector. To his care, therefore, Isabel was consigned. She acquiesced listlessly in the arrangement. There were no sharp heart-wrenches, only a placid resignation which softened the shock of separation. Nevertheless at parting she clung to Lady Hetherington, and implored that she might be allowed to remain and die at home. But strength revived, and during the long days of dreamy convalescence at sea, her soul wandered back from the

shadowy borders. Her imagination took wings and soared; and this new world to which she had come—this world of strange never-ending forest, teeming with new life and unfamiliar sounds, lighted by unknown stars, which were as jewels in God's coronal—seemed the materialisation of those realms of fantasy in which during her illness her mind had roamed.

The night wore away. The murmur of insects was hushed, and the dingoes' doleful howl and curlews' plaintive crying ceased. The train glided on through an interminable aisle of gaunt trees, their foliage silver-white with dew. Isabel's eyes closed; she slept and dreamed—one of those curious vivid dreams which visit us when the brain is excited by new scenes. The motion rocked her gently, and she fancied herself in a boat floating upon the bosom of a broad and rapid



river. She was not alone. A man was rowing the boat, but his back was towards her, and his face hidden. It seemed borne in upon her that though he was a stranger some inexplicable bond united them. The sun shone gloriously; little wavelets gleamed beneath its rays and leaped up joyously to kiss the drooping branches of crimson-blossomed trees that grew upon the banks. Isabel's bosom heaved with soft exhilaration. Oh! how beautiful life was! She felt a curious sense of expansion, of pure and perfect happiness, and would fain have held out her arms to embrace—she knew not what. Then creeping over her, came a vague trouble and wonder. The sky changed and darkened; the smiling day became gloomy night. Neither moon nor stars lightened the blackness. The river turned to an angry sea, the rising waves

threatened to engulf the boat. "Oh, must I die?" cried Isabel to her dream companion; "and may I not see your face?" In the darkness he turned and held out his arms and she crept into them and was soothed. The gloom hid his features, but she beheld his eyes, large and sad, but full of tenderness. He clasped her to his heart, and the trouble was stilled. "Is this love?" she asked. "Love is faith," he answered. She felt his kiss upon her lips, and in that thrill of exquisite joy she awoke.

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## CHAPTER IX.

## DROPPED AT THE SLIPRAILS.

MORNING had dawned ; and a pale pink glow suffused the eastern sky. The train was no longer in motion. An uncouth-looking guard standing by the door of the compartment was already uncere- moniously throwing on the wayside such small articles of luggage as came to his hand.

“ Stop, my friend ! ” cried Captain Clephane. “ That dressing-bag is fitted up with silver and glass, and might be

injured if it happened to strike against a gum-tree. Here, take my swag and pitch it where you choose; and there's a glass of grog for your trouble, and good-day to you! Now, Isabel."

The girl, flushed from the recollection of her dream, had risen in a dazed manner from her impromptu couch, and, having tied on her hat and descended from the carriage, gazed bewilderedly around her. Here were trees, trees, nothing but trees, except, indeed, a rough fence of split wood which lost itself among the thickening trunks. Her two portmanteaus lay forlornly on the grass. The train whizzed away, and Isabel realised that they had been dropped in this promiscuous fashion at the Gundalunda slip-rails.

"I thought that some of them would have been down to meet us," said Cle-

phane. "I daresay they'll turn up presently. Just wait a minute, Isabel, while I drag this baggage through the fence, and then we'll walk along that track to the head station. It's no distance. I'll give a shout in case there's a black boy within hail."

A series of long melodious *cooees* echoed through the bush, but evoked no answering sound. While Clephane let down the slip-rails and pulled the portmanteaus through, Isabel seated herself upon a fallen log and drank in the beauty and freshness of the early morning. A white mist clung to the gum-trees, silvering their dull green leaves and bringing out their aromatic fragrance. The grass lay low from its weight of dew, and the young green things looked grateful for the moisture, which would too soon be dried up. The forest was unlike any wooded

ground Isabel had ever seen—the trees were so tall and straggling, the colouring so neutral, the herbage so sparse. Here were no green glades or flowery dells. Upon a slight rise a little distance off, an army of curious-looking grass-trees raised aloft their plummy tufts and brown spears; and there, just beyond the paddock-fence, two or three startled kangaroos lifted their fawn-like heads and bounded away towards a distant ridge.

They walked on under the dripping branches, and as sunrise reddened the sky, the vapours dispersed, and there awoke overhead a shivering twitter of little birds. Gradually the stir intensified. Cockatoos flew from bough to bough uttering discordant shrieks which almost drowned the magpies' liquid note, heard at its best in the early morning. The black cuckoo sent forth his metallic *coo-eh*. The laugh-

ing jackasses yelled out a mocking chorus; and the locusts commenced their monotonous whirr.

They passed a herd of drowsy cattle, camped beneath a clump of wattles; these gazed with sleepy eyes but did not move. Now, an opossum scuttled to the shelter of a hollow tree, or a jew-lizard, perched upon some withered bough, erected its portentous-looking ruff and hissed menacingly.

A mile or more had been accomplished. The country began to look less wild. Here and there clearings had been made. Giant logs, covered with moss and fern, lay embedded in the grass, corpse-like reminders to their still erect brethren—which, stripped of bark, stretched out gaunt grey arms as if imploring for grace—that they were awaiting a similar fate.

In the distance, faint rings of smoke

curled to the sky; a cluster of cottages might be seen; and, on the other side of a fence they were skirting, was the stock-yard, of which the bristling posts and log-rails rose in the centre of an oasis of couch-grass. From a gibbet at one corner hung suspended the carcase of a newly-slaughtered beast. Close by, two huge iron pots raised upon erections of rough stone looked like altars raised for the performance of heathen rites. The grinning faces, half-clad figures, and strange jabber of several aboriginals who plied the fire beneath, were in keeping with the suggestion. There was something savage and picturesque about the scene. A flock of crows scenting carrion swirled and swooped in the air above the slain animal; and a crowd of curs of every description, from the sleek, well-bred kangaroo-hound to the hairless mongrel of the blacks'



camp, surrounded the place of carnage, and appeared too well engaged to pay any attention to the new arrivals.

As they followed the fence to the slip-rails which gave admittance to the inner paddock, loud shouts, *cooees*, and cracking of whips, sounded in the rear. There was a stampede of horses past the yard, manes flowing, tails flying, nostrils distended. A stockman and a brace of black-boys rounded the mob, while following at a more leisurely pace came two gentlemen—Yes, they *were* gentlemen, decided Isabel, whose discernment had been quickened even during her two days' residence in Australia. Though they were coatless, and brandished whips like the others, there was about both an easy air of command not to be mistaken.

Clephane cooeed. At sight of his neighbour and the English girl one of

these riders spurred his horse to a brisk canter, and met his guests at the dividing fence. He dismounted, let down the sliprails, and, cabbage-tree hat in hand, advanced towards Miss Gauntlett.

He looked shy and awkward. This was hardly surprising, for he was overwhelmed by the sudden consciousness that this dainty English lady had probably never before been received by a host similarly garbed in dirty moleskin nether garments, a Crimean shirt, collarless, open at the neck, and stained with blood—for, had she arrived a quarter of an hour earlier, he would have been discovered in the act of skinning the dead bullock—with such brawny bared arms, and so great a deficiency in polite phrases. He fancied that there was a smile upon Isabel's lips. As a matter of fact she had never been remarkable for that fine perception of con-

trast in which we are told lies the true sense of humour; but a faculty is developed with the opportunity for its exercise, and she was certainly amused and struck by the novelty of her surroundings.

“Hullo, old fellow!” said Clephane. “Let me introduce my niece. Mr. Ferguson, Miss Gauntlett.”

The master of Gundalunda stammered out some apologies. He thought the train must be earlier than usual. He had been on the point of riding down the paddock to meet it.

Isabel held out her hand, but found no suitable words in which to acknowledge the greeting. She was shy, too, and also interested in examining her host. Already her imagination had been stimulated by Clephane’s reference to the love affair between Ferguson and Gretta Reay.

Although her sensibilities were somewhat jarred by the roughness of his appearance, she was obliged to confess that he was a lover of whom any Australian maiden might justly feel proud—six foot two in his boots, and, unlike most colonially-born men, muscular as a champion athlete. The red mounted to his brow as he caught her look, but the flush was not unbecoming to his bronzed face, with its honest grey eyes, straight features, tawny moustache, and expression of frank determination.

“I have been impressing upon my niece,” continued Clephane, with his rather affected banter, “that we are not at all elaborate in our social arrangements hereabouts; and that the adjective which best describes Australian manners and customs is ‘casual.’ For example, when we expect lady visitors from England,

accustomed to all the luxuries of European railway travelling, we don't send the brougham down to the station with a footman to open the door and a spring-cart for the imperials. We have 'em all, boxes and lady, dropped at the slip-rails of our paddock-fence. Our fair guest walks two miles over the dewy grass."

"Oh, come, it isn't more than a mile," earnestly exclaimed Ferguson; "and your sisters-in-law always say they like it."

"I daresay they do, and Miss Gauntlett also. Not a welcome," Clephane went on, tragically, "except from cockatoos and bandicoots; finally she sees the most primitive and unappetizing preparations for breakfast staring her in the face. It's naturalism of the purest kind, dear Ferguson—too pure, even, to suit the school of Zola. We march with the times, you observe, Isabel; but it's a little startling

to the nerves of one brought up in the gilded haunts of civilization."

Isabel laughed somewhat hysterically, for she was tired; and Mr. Ferguson rejoined, good-humouredly, not quite knowing how far Clephane was in jest or earnest:

"He never loses an opportunity of chaffing me, Miss Gauntlett. But I *am* awfully sorry that you should have arrived in this forlorn way. I don't know how to apologise sufficiently. We can't help being a bit rough in the bush, you know, and I daresay you are startled. We quite meant to be at the slip-rails to break things easily to you, but the fact is, it's killing morning. We're mustering just now; all the hands are busy; and a beast of a scrubber got out of the yard, and was over the river in no time. I'd have let him go if it hadn't been for Mr. Reay,

for she's one of yours, Clephane—a poley cow, with the Tieryboo brand; and I must say that she doesn't do credit to your stock-keeping."

"A poley cow, branded with a star on the near shoulder?" excitedly cried Clephane. "God bless you, dear Ferguson, she's the best-bred animal I've got on the run, and the wildest. Send her with the tailing-mob for a bit. I'll go and have a look at her."

"Uncle Jack," pleaded Isabel, faintly, "are my trunks quite safe?"

"Bless me—yes. The cattle won't eat them, and there's nobody to prig them."

"They shall be brought up directly, Miss Gauntlett," said Ferguson.

Another gentleman, middle-aged, long-legged, spare, Scotch-looking, with sandy, greyish hair, a protruding upper lip, and a tendency to gesticulation, joined the

group. He had walked from the stock-yard leading his horse, and now turned to the black boy, who was following him. "Hi, Combo, fetch 'em cart. Yan along a slip-rails. Bring up swag belonging to White Mary. Murra make haste.' You're welcome, Miss Gauntlett. You'll be staying at my station, Doondi, for a bit now. You'll find the bush rough after England, though I've almost forgotten what that's like, for it's forty-two years since I left it. I hope the climate 'll restore your health. You don't look to me so vara delicate; but all Australian girls are pale-faces, and they are mostly weeds, so you'll show fair beside them. You'll be tired. Ferguson, don't let us be standing here. You're wanted in the yards, and I'll take the young lady to Judith Blaize, who's ooking out for her."



Mr. Reay jerked out his sentences with hardly a stop between them, but each word uttered deliberately, as though he were giving forth a series of statements which could not and should not be controverted. He then took possession of a hand-bag Isabel carried, and, while Ferguson diverged to the stock-yard, led the way to the homestead, walking like a pair of compasses, so long did his legs seem in proportion to his body. There was something quite comic in his impulsive decisiveness, and, if the phrase may be used, slow impetuosity.

"Well!" said he, "and what is going to be the upshot of this summer session?"

"Oh, I went to the House the other night. They were all snarling like a pack of hungry hounds. There'll be no adjournment for Christmas till the bone

has been picked clean. The Government tried its strength and got so discomfited that the Opposition chief stopped in his triumph to pat poor old Mills of 'Works' on the back, and tell him he had fought like a man."

Mr. Reay chuckled with a delight he tried to conceal. "I won't go near 'em," he exclaimed. "Catesby turned tail on my Railway measure, and he shall fight for his Polynesian Bill without my help. When they're ready to put me into 'Works,' and uphold my Railway policy, I'll join him—not a day sooner."

"Catesby is magnificent," continued Clephane, "especially after he has come back from the Parliamentary refreshment bar. I must say that the *rationale* of winter sessions is very obvious; but is not the import duty on 'Jim Hennessy' and Martell's 'Three Stars' worth con-

sidering? Just think it over, Mr. Reay, in connection with the Free Trade question. I wish you had heard Catesby. This sort of thing"—and he struck an attitude and apostrophized the gum-trees: "*Fellow-countrymen, it is time to return to a moral, a rational, a pacific policy—not one of Intercolonial jealousy and suspicion; of arrogant claims for ascendancy; of blood-shed, bluster, and blow.*" I assure you it was fine. But to drop politics, what is the news from Doondi?"

"Combo brought a letter from Sib this morning. Would ye like to hear it? That's my son, Sebastian, Miss Gauntlett. Ye'll obsairve he does not waste words, in which respect he differs from one of his sisters. Here it is—I'll read it to you."

Mr. Reay opened out a large sheet of letter-paper, in the centre of which were two lines of writing, and read aloud—

“DEAR FATHER,—

“All’s well, except Billy the bull, which is dead of pleuro.

“Your affectionate son,

“SEBASTIAN REAY.”

“That’s important news, Jack, for it just means a hundred pounds out of my pocket, a bother with inoculating, and may-be a delay in sending our cattle west. Here we are at the house, and there’s Judith Blaize out among her chickens. She’s a better hand at getting up than her husband. He’s a puir creature, and she’s clean daft about him; but there’s no great harm in him;—at least, I don’t think so. I was just watchin’ him yesterday pantin’ and blowin’ over a little spade fit for Jinks, and out she comes,—while I was thinkin’, ‘You’re a thing to ca’ yoursel a man; and the work ye do is nae mair

than a hen 'scrappitin','—'Ducky darlin' now,' she says, 'the sun is hot, and ye mustn't work so hard; and now do-ant ye overtire yourself, ducky darlin.'” And stopping short, and waving one arm in a burst of energy, he exclaimed, “If I was James Ferguson, by the Lord, I'd ducky darlin' him! But she is a good soul is Judith Blaize.”

## CHAPTER X.

## GUNDALUNDA.

GUNDALUNDA head-station was a queer dilapidated cluster of huts perched upon the slope of a gentle rise, from which might be seen a glorious expanse of rolling downs timbered with lightwood and iron-bark trees, and with a line of blue mountains showing in the distance. The principal building was of slab, roofed with sheets of bark fastened down by transversely-placed saplings. Passion-fruit and vines closed in the veranda, which, less

tasteful than that at Doondi, where the stands of plants were the joint care of Hester Murgatroyd and the Kanaka, was filled with squatters' chairs and hammocks, while a canvas water-bucket dripped from the ceiling, and the wall was hung with stockwhips, spurs, and bridles. To the right of this building were two or three other tumble-down huts, presumably kitchen and outhouses; and to the left a trimmer cottage, the veranda of which gave indications of feminine occupation in the shape of a sewing-machine and a basket full of unmade garments. A black gin leaned against one of the posts holding a piccaniny, smoking a short pipe, and spasmodically shredding the husks from a bundle of Indian corn. She was dressed in the discarded skirt of a white woman, fastened over one shoulder and under the other, leaving her lean arms classically

bare. A crimson kerchief bound her woolly hair, and stuck in it were another pipe and half a fig of tobacco. A tame cockatoo superintended operations, running backwards and forwards between the ledge and the garden.

In this garden, fruit-trees, shrubs, flowers and vegetables grew at random—cabbages side by side with brilliant exotic creepers, a trellis of vines sheltering a patch of mignonette. Here a bank of late purple irises, and there a *Gloire de Dijon* rose strewing its creamy petals over a bed of artichokes.

As Mr. Reay opened the gate, the black gin set up a shrill jabber of salutation. "Yah, yah, wurra yee. Hi, Mussus. Budgery White Mary. My word cobbon budgery that fellow." The cockatoo shrieked "Who are you? what's your name? The



top of the morning to ye. Got a kiss for Polly?" ; while a stout lady, in a mushroom hat and lavender print-gown, who outside the garden-palings was scattering corn among a flock of roosters, turned and flew forward with a flutter and waddling movement not unlike the mode of progression of one of her own ducks. She was comely and fresh-complexioned, with aquiline features, blond ringlets, and an expression of good-humoured vivacity.

"Dear heart!" cried she, with a sprightly elevation of her eyebrows and innocent smile which corresponded with her child-like blue eyes, "I thought there'd have been a greater flourish of trumpets over your arrival, Miss Gauntlett, and you all the way from England, too! I'll be bound if one of the Wyeroo miners' wives had come to pay us a visit she'd

have made herself heard half a mile off. And now tell me, what do ye think of Australia?"

Mrs. Blaize had a habit of putting comprehensive questions. Happily she never required an answer.

"She'll be in a better position to state her opinion, Judith, when you have taken her in and given her some tea," said Mr. Reay. "She has been travelling all night, and that isn't agreeable—at least I do-an't think so. If she slept it's more than I could do, supposing that my principles would permit me to make use of what I consider the ruination of the country."

"Dear heart, Duncan," said Mrs. Blaize, sweetly, "I can't think how it is, but you do remind me of an old uncle of mine who had softening of the brain when I was a girl, and who always fancied that he saw

the Dardanelles out of his study-window. And when we ventured to suggest that the Dardanelles was in Turkey all he would answer was, 'The world is very censorious.' I suppose it is because you are so set against the railways; and I daresay you are right. But I must say that I think they are a great convenience in the way of fetching up stores. *I* mind the time when we were three months at Oreti Downs without flour and the bullock-drays stopped by flooded creeks! The tea is ready, and there are some beautiful scones fresh out of the oven. My old man is not very well this morning—a touch of lumbago from stooping over his gardenings; but you'll find everything you want, Captain Clephane, in Mr. Ferguson's room."

"And now, my dear," she exclaimed, when she had convoyed Isabel to a white

boarded chamber, the drapery of which was spotless, and the window-frame wreathed by a long lilac thumbergia, and had with her own hands placed fragrant tea and steaming cakes before her guest, "you'll let me kiss you, won't you? I am aunt to your uncle's wife, so that you have a right to a corner of my heart. There's no one to oust you out of it. Those I love are sweet to me as spring flowers. Hester Murgatroyd puts me in mind of one of those limp creamy roses that never opens out its scented heart. Gretta is just a spray of wattle, a blossom of the Australian woods; but you I can liken only to a pale English snowdrop. Though I married when I was seventeen and went to live on Oreti Downs—where blacks, blight, and the scab among our sheep turned me into a hag before my time—I've many tender thoughts about

my native land. By-and-bye I'll tell you a few of my experiences; and if the bush seems to you a little rough in these days you'll just compare it with the past and be thankful."

"I assure you," protested Isabel; but Mrs. Blaize did not allow her to proceed.

"You'll just be prepared to find us a dull, uncultivated set," she continued, dolefully shaking her head. "If any one should have an advantage it's myself, for I have been fortunate enough to marry a man who doesn't own many intellectual superiors. Not but what intellect has its drawbacks as you'll perhaps admit when you are introduced to my husband's brother; but he is just an example of sounding brass and tinkling cymbals, whereas *my* Mr. Blaize, being of a receptive nature, is slow to speech and full of

wisdom. Now, tell me before I go, what do ye think of Australia?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Blaize," said Isabel, "if every one is as kind to me as the people I have already met, I shall never have a word to say against it; and, as for the bush, I think it perfectly delightful."

A great bell clanged in the larger house, and outside there was a sound of voices and of dogs barking.

"They are bringing down the meat," said Mrs. Blaize; "and I must go and pick out the best rounds for spicing. Ah, my dear, you'll find it true enough that the practicalities of Australian life nip the fragile buds of fancy before they have time to bloom. Since you really will not go to bed, I'll send your uncle for you when breakfast is ready, and he'll take you over to Mr. Ferguson's house."

Go to bed! upon that glorious summer

forms of the blacks coiled upon their red blankets and opossum-rugs, the bits of crimson with which the women had adorned themselves, and the naked figures of the piccaninies dancing round the fire in imp-like glee.

Isabel watched the young man ride round to the garden-fence, there unsaddle his horse, dash a bucket of cold water over the animal's back, turn him loose into the paddock, and deposit his saddle and bridle upon the edge of the veranda. At that moment the bell pealed again, and Captain Clephane's voice sounded at his niece's door.

Young Ferguson—fresh from his morning-swim in the creek, with his straight features, his column-like throat, and the close tendrils of light hair fringing his forehead, the only portion of his face not copper-colour—looked like the modern

embodiment of some Greek demi-god resuscitated from the limbo of dead-and-gone mythology, and transplanted from classical regions to an Arcadia unconsecrated by tradition. He had removed all traces of stock-yard labour, and his spotless riding-breeches, blue-striped shirt, and light alpaca coat left nothing to be desired in the matter of costume. He held in his hand a half-blown rose; and, as Isabel Gauntlett entered, placed it beside her plate with an entire absence of self-consciousness, which rendered the act of gallantry less a tribute to the individual than a token of the homage so readily accorded by the typical Australian to a refined woman.

Underlying the rough-and-ready manners, and the prosaic routine of bush-life, there is an old-world chivalry, a reverence for women, a purity of thought, a deli-



cacy of sentiment, not always to be found in what Clephane called "the gilded haunts of civilization." This is partly due to the breezy moral atmosphere, and partly to the influence of books, which become living realities in the solitude and monotony of existence among the gum-trees. The typical Australian is an odd combination of the practical and the ideal. He is like a student who learns to read to himself a foreign language, but does not attain to its pronunciation. He has no knowledge of current jargon or society slang. He has unconsciously rejected vulgarisms and shallow conceits; but all the deeper thoughts—the poetry of life which appeals to the soul—he has made his own.

## CHAPTER XI.

## THE FIRST DAY IN THE BUSH.

NOT that the conversation this morning gave evidence of either culture or romance.

Mrs. Blaize, presiding over the teapot, was impressing upon Mr. Ferguson the necessity for reinforcing the herd of milkers. Mr. Reay, attacking his breakfast with the spasmodic solemnity which marked his speech and movements, was discussing the desirability of choosing, from the pastures of one Nash, a neigh-

bouring squatter, a successor to Billy the bull, deceased; and the young Irishman, introduced as Mr. Patrick Desmond, announced that he had not washed out gold enough that week to pay for his grub, and was thinking of turning drover again if he could get a job.

Said Mr. Reay, looking up suddenly from his plate, "Well, you can ride over to Doondi if you like, Desmond. We're sending our mob north-west in about three weeks' time; and, if you hear of another good hand with cattle, I don't mind letting him tail the weaners for a bit to see how he shapes."

"Sure, an' I'm your man," said Pat Desmond, with alacrity; "and I know a first-rate chap who was overlanding for Fyson in New South Wales, and turned up at Wyeroo with his swag and five shillings in his pocket; and that was all

he had in the world, barring his revolver ; and for why ? but that thief, old Fyson, had gone smash and never paid him a penny. He took a billet in the Great Phoenix, and is about as sick of the diggings as I am. Anyhow, Mr. Ferguson, I've sent my mate to prospect for a new claim, and it's after lending a hand at the mustering that I'll be if you want me, and if you don't, I'll be glad of a spell."

"Spell as long as you like, Pat," said Ferguson. "I've got to camp on the other side of the run, I'm sorry to say ; so if you'll show Miss Gauntlett about the place, and help her to pass the time, I shan't feel so guilty in leaving her."

Mr. Patrick Desmond, who was a good-looking, dark-haired youth, with a ruddy complexion, and a twinkle in his blue

eyes, turned to Isabel, beside whom he was seated.

“And isn’t it the job that suits me entirely, Miss Gauntlett? And it isn’t to a Gundalunda scrubber that I’ll be making my bow while I’m here. I’m a sort of cousin of Mrs. Blaize’s, and by that token of reasoning I’m your cousin too. Anyway, I’m at your orders. And how’s your husband, Mrs. Blaize?”

“Indeed, and my old man is but poorly,” rejoined that lady; “and he is having his breakfast in bed. He says he doesn’t like it, but ye know that isn’t true; for give him a book and he is happy, whether he is in a horizontal position or a perpendicular one. The thing he doesn’t like is being dosed and coddled. But I tuck him up and wrap a little shawl round him, and he is just obliged to submit. I never had him in such good order,

for let me assure you he is not a man to be dictated to by a woman." She heaved a deep sigh, and taking advantage of the pause Mr. Pat Desmond broke in. It seemed to Isabel that almost everybody at Gundalunda was fond of hearing the sound of his or her own voice, and that the stranger within their gates—or rather their slip-rails—was under no obligations to be politely garrulous.

"I say, Mr. Ferguson, there's one thing that Miss Gauntlett ought to do. We *must* drive her over to Wyeroo in iligant style, and take her down the Great Phoenix."

But Mrs. Blaize's tongue, once set in motion, was not to be lightly checked.

"There's disappointments in all earthly plans, Miss Gauntlett," she said. "My husband was formerly a clergyman; and if it hadn't been for his love of reading he'd

have remained a respected minister of the Gospel, instead of being what he is. If you ever think of settling in Australia, don't marry a parson, or, if ye do, keep atheistical books out of his reach, for they'll just thrust you out of a comfortable cure of souls and lead ye a dance up into the Never Never country, where but for James Ferguson's kindness we should be now." Mrs. Blaize uttered the above in a rapid and tragic aside, keeping one eye shut while she talked. "Here's my brother-in-law!" she added; "I call him 'Old Gold' because he is so yellow. Pat, we're just snuffed out by these intellectual people. Move a little closer to me. Well, Gustavus, and how did you sleep last night?"

Mr. Gustavus Blaize was lean, shrivelled, and dyspeptic-looking. His face resembled that of a mummy animated by

a pair of bilious eyes, which nevertheless glowed at times with the ardour peculiar to impressionable and enthusiastic dispositions. They rested admiringly upon Isabel, in whose direction he executed an elaborate bow. He had an alert way of jerking up his chin, and spoke in high-pitched melancholy tones.

“But passably, thank you, Sister Judith. My enemy returned at four o’clock this morning”—he laid his hand pathetically upon the lower portion of his waistcoat. (“It’s the coats of the stomach,” explained Mrs. Blaize, in parenthesis.) “But I kept him at bay by swallowing draughts of scalding tea; and, as I sat groaning at my window, my pain was alleviated by the sight of Miss Gauntlett”—another bow—“appearing like Aurora with the dawn.”

“Old fool!” observed Mrs. Blaize, in an audible sotto voce. “The sun was



well up when you arrived. He's at his favourite game, Pat; and if Miss Gauntlett stays here a week he'll be making her an offer of marriage.—You need not look so embarrassed, my dear—he is very deaf and can't hear a word I say; but he wouldn't acknowledge it for the world. Don't encourage him—a lean, dilapidated broom-handle with a lump of brains at the top. I'm not denying that he has talent; it runs in the family. But Gustavus is not to be compared to my husband, who is just a very remarkable man.”

The men of business at the other end of the table rose. They had paid but little attention to the more frivolous chatter, having been too much absorbed in a discussion concerning the poley cow aforementioned. Mr. Ferguson came round and shook hands with Isabel.

"Miss Gauntlett, I am ashamed of having talked shop before you. We generally make a point of keeping cattle in the background when ladies are present; but just now I am finishing up my mustering, and have to start off for the other side of the run. I must say good-bye, for I'm afraid my calves won't get branded while I do the honours of the station. I shall place you in charge of Mr. Gustavus Blaize and Pat Desmond, who have only to consider how to amuse you."

He hurried off.

"Miss Gauntlett," cried Pat, "isn't it a gold-mine, now, that it'll please you to see? We'll spin you over to Wyeroo in no time at all."

"Let me recommend for to-day a hammock slung in some sequestered corner of the veranda," said Mr. Gustavus Blaize, magniloquently, "so that the soul

may revel in dreamy sympathy with Nature, and the sensitive ear attune itself to new harmonies. But Miss Gauntlett has but to express a wish, and her faithful servants will endeavour to gratify it."

"Uncle Jack," exclaimed the young girl, "why didn't you prepare me for this sort of enchantment? Are there any more slaves of the ring?"

"Yes; I shall leave Combo at your disposal, and I should not be surprised if King Comongin turned up in all his war-paint to do homage to you as the representative of 'big fellow white Mary a long a water,' otherwise Her Gracious Majesty."

"Who is King Comongin?"

"Mr. Reay's henchman, sheltered by him from the arm of the law. By the way," added Captain Clephane, turning

to his father-in-law, "there's no doubt that Comongin was the murderer of Royds. Hill, of the Native Police, says he knows it as a fact, and will send you the papers which prove it. You'll have to turn him off Doondi."

Mr. Reay's upper lip went down.

"I've said he should go if it was proved that he speared Royds; but I kept out of the way of asking questions. Comongin has had his grub from me for five years, and his tribe have never done me a hand's-turn of mischief. It's my opinion that if the blacks are treated fairly they'll treat you likewise. Come along, Clephane. There's Combo with the horses. We had better be starting for Nash's. You'll keep an eye on that drover, Desmond. It's surprising what good men one sometimes picks up at the diggings."

"Ah," said Mrs. Blaize, shaking her

head sympathetically, "there's many a gentleman's son at Wyeroo that has no business to be in such company—honourables and esquires are as thick as cedar-berries. I'd like to start a reformatory for all the ne'er-do-weels in Australia."

"You'd have your hands full, Judith," retorted Mr. Reay, grimly. "Better restrict yourself to the conversion of the blacks. And how is it that you find yourself at liberty, Mr. Gustavus Blaize? I thought you were due at Preston this week."

"Sure!" answered Mr. Desmond, "and will not Mr. Gustavus be too valuable a servant to the country for him to be let run into danger? Haven't you heard the news, Mr. Reay. There's one of the New South Wales bushrangers that has crossed the border, and was after sticking up the Preston mail a few days ago. A

digger I was speaking to told me he'd fallen in with him, and that he is a daring fellow, and will be after taking Ned Kelly as his model. There'll be a ruction on the Eura one of these days; and 'deed then Mr. Gustavus had better write to the Colonial Secretary, and ask for an escort of mounted police."

Whereupon there were expressions of incredulity and some mild banter. The party dispersed. Mr. Reay and Captain Clephane cantered down the paddock, and from the veranda, James Ferguson, at the head of a retinue of stockmen, blackboys, and dogs, might be seen jogging across the plain; the white shirts of the men, the gaudy handkerchiefs which girt the waists of the blackboys, and the roll of crimson blankets strapped to each saddle-bow, making vivid patches among the lines of tree-stems.

Mrs. Blaize departed, intent upon household cares, and the three remaining, betook themselves to a bowery corner of the veranda, where the vine-leaves cast quivering shadows upon the boards, and purpling grapes hung temptingly, where bright-eyed lizards darted in and out of the crevices, and tiny birds flew out from their nests under the bark eaves; while innumerable insects kept up a pleasant buzz, and a light breeze swept in from the garden, laden with rich perfumes. Isabel lay back in a squatter's chair, and yielded herself to the sense of dreamy enjoyment which crept over her.

"And if Mr. Durnford was here, he'd be after writing a poem on you," said young Desmond, gazing at her with frank admiration as he leaned against a veranda-post opposite. "You wouldn't think it, perhaps, Miss Gauntlett, but it's a senti-

mental kind of chap that I am, and I am fond of poetry. Durnford's things give me a creepy feeling down the spine. Deed and it's a queer feeling, and nothing else has ever given it to me, barring Miss Gretta Reay's singing. That's because his poetry has the true Australian ring I suppose. It's like summer nights, with the stars shining over the mountains, and the lilies asleep on the lagoon, and all the wild sounds turned into music. It would be like Miss Gretta av it wasn't that she is like no one but just herself. And I had better make a clean breast of it, Miss Gauntlett, and tell you at once I have been in love with her."

"You *have been* in love, with Miss Reay, Mr. Desmond?" repeated Isabel.

"Deed, then, that's all over. It's Jinks now that is queen of my soul. It wouldn't be for myself to run in the same



race with Mr. Ferguson. Besides, I haven't any business to be falling in love. I'm only a poor beggar of a new chum with an allowance of 80*l.* a year, bad luck to it. But sure and I'm always after the same old game. I'm as bad as Gustavus Blaize, that has asked every girl in the district to marry him. Now don't you be making a handle of that against me, Miss Gauntlett, and I'll tell you what—I'll promise not to get spoony on you if you'll consent to be my friend. Will you now?"

"Willingly," answered Isabel, laughing, "to avoid the alternative."

Pat Desmond laughed too. "All right, Mr. Blaize," to that gentleman, who approached from the inner room with a book in his hand. "Fire away! What have you got there?"

"If you'll permit me, Miss Gauntlett, I'll read you something of Durnford's."

“I should like it very much, Mr. Blaize.”

Mr. Blaize turned over the leaves of his book, eying Isabel sentimentally at the same time.

“You come from Devonshire, Miss Gauntlett?”

“Yes,” returned Isabel.

“It is a beautiful country,” said Mr. Blaize. “During my last visit in England I spent some days with a friend in, I believe, your neighbourhood. Devonshire is famous——”

“For apples and cider,” put in Pat.

“For the beauty of its women,” gallantly remarked Mr. Blaize. “I believe that I heard your brother-in-law’s name in connection with the fox-hounds.”

“He’s the master,” said Isabel. “He likes hunting and shooting.”

"John Bull all out," put in Pat. "But fire off, Mr. Blaize."

"You have heard of Mr. Durnford, our Eura poet, Miss Gauntlett?" said Mr. Gustavus.

"No," said Isabel; "only what Mr. Desmond has just told me."

"He is tutor to the young Reays; but I rejoice to learn that his genius will find play in a wider arena. In confidence, it was through my representation that he was offered the sub-editorship of the *Leichardt Lands Review*. This is a paper to which I occasionally contribute, for I consider it a duty to elevate as far as possible the literary tone of the Australian colonies."

"Hear the ould fool, now!" murmured Pat.

"In fact I am one of the proprietors of the *Review*," continued Mr. Blaize, mag-

nificantly. "This book was published in Melbourne anonymously a year ago. It made a stir. I read it, and admired it. Several coincidences struck me. After a time I became convinced that it could only have been written by some one living on the Eura. My suspicions pointed to the right man, and I made known my discovery in the pages of *The Review*. Mr. Durnford resented what he was pleased to term my interference. I, on the contrary, consider that I have rendered a service to society and to literature. A mystery is a wrong to the community; when I scent one I feel it my duty to unearth it. Don't you agree with me, Miss Gauntlett?"

"No, Mr. Blaize," warmly retorted Isabel; "I should not like to look upon myself as a social detective. But then, I'm a woman, and one doesn't want to

argue about moral questions on a day like this. Please begin reading."

Mr. Gustavus turned over the pages and cleared his throat. "In this poem," said he, by way of prologue, "Australian nature is depicted under the guise of a woman. She is vaguely discontented with her own savage beauty. She has a dim perception of something higher. There is within her bosom a warring of the earthly and the spiritual. Her half-voluptuous yearning towards the Genius of art in the form of a star draws towards her the Star Spirit. She worships him at first in sensuous ecstasy, at last with the pure adoration of an awakened soul. All this is set forth in the passionate language of one who, if he has not loved, at least dreams vividly of love."

Mr. Gustavus Blaize's sullen face became for the moment transfigured by the influ-

ence of reflex emotion. His really fine eyes glowed, and his voice vibrated with an enthusiasm which was in the present instance unaffected. He read well, and delighted in exhibiting the accomplishment; it would have rendered a young Adonis irresistible.

## CHAPTER XII.

## MRS. BLAIZE'S REMINISCENCES.

PATRICK DESMOND was right. Durnford's poem had the true Australian flavour. These wild, ardent notes rang in unison with the rushing of flooded rivers, the sighing of sheoaks, the plaintive wailing of curlews, and with the weird cries which haunt the Australian bush. They suggested moonlit mountain-peaks, measureless expanse of plain and forest, and gleaming southern skies. They had never been struck in harmony with the twitter-

ing of sparrows, the trilling of nightingales, or the murmur of a gentle breeze rustling through the foliage of spring-clad woods. There was nothing in them of green fields, yellowing corn, garden-like landscape. They described Australia—and Australia only.

In this speciality of the source of inspiration, and in a certain transcendental passion, which seemed to oscillate between earth and heaven—sometimes sensuous and sometimes spiritual—lay the peculiar fascination of the poem. In other respects its originality was of the stereotyped kind. There was the note of rebellion against accepted beliefs in religion and morals; the pagan worship of form; the ring of Comtism; the almost exaggerated adoration of woman, which is associated with the modern “cult.” It might be doubted whether Mr. Durnford possessed



that large-souled enthusiasm which makes the undying poet. But, if his capacity for passion were restricted to one phase, that was at least vividly expressed.

“Very good, very good!” bleated a melancholy voice in the garden. “You read well, Gustavus. I remember the time when you thought of going in for parlour recitation. I always think myself, that to recite well is an enviable accomplishment.”

A copy-book platitude was Mr. Blaize’s invariable anti-climax. He smiled as though he had made a profound statement. Isabel looked up. She saw a little wizened figure, with a massive head, contemplative eyes, a meek mouth, and soft grey hair. Mr. Blaize looked very old—considerably older than his brother, whom he resembled—but the face was

sadder, less acrid, and not so alert as that of the Government Inspector.

With one hand he supported a large green umbrella, covered with white calico; in the other he carried a little bunch of roses and sweet-scented verbena, at which, every now and then, he sniffed with apparent pleasure. He bade Isabel welcome with gentle cordiality; looked at her for a moment or two with a wistful expression in his eyes, sighed softly, then wandered into the garden, and, folding up his umbrella, occupied himself in pruning an ill-kempt rosebush or thinning a bunch of grapes. At intervals he would draw forth a book from his pocket, and, seating himself, would read intently for a few minutes, then proceed again with his work.

Mrs. Blaize had established herself during the reading before her sewing-

machine, and now watched her husband with evident and touching solicitude, uttering every now and then some remark of a tender, expostulatory kind, which called forth the baldest response.

It struck Isabel that there was a peculiar pathos in the attitude of this couple. The pathos was that of commonplace life and character, which appeals less forcibly to our sensibilities, perhaps because we meet it at every street corner and in every homely existence that comes into contact with our own. The wistful affection of the wife, in which there was an element of comicality, suggesting the flutter of a well-feathered hen, contrasted sharply with the melancholy apathy of the husband. Why must our sympathy be always ready on demand for youth and beauty in distress, and why should there be so little to spare for the middle-aged

and unlovely? Kind-hearted Mrs. Blaize, with her petty sentimentalities, her garrulous tongue, her blond curls, and her fifty years, had her own world of romance and of secret care. Profoundly loving her husband, she nursed in her bosom the bitter consciousness that but affectionate toleration was awarded her in return. Her tears fell frequently, mingling with the spice and saltpetre which made her rounds so excellent, and with the water which washed her butter. Her childless condition was to her a cause for mourning; and, also, when she read her bible, being a devout woman and an implicit believer in the book of Genesis, she grieved that her husband had cast away his faith in a personal and beneficent Creator, and had abandoned the vocation unto which he had been called.

Mr. Blaize's falling away dated from

the sudden death by drowning of his only child—a daughter by his first wife, to whom he had been devotedly attached. From that time he had become a changed man. He no longer cared to work. He refused to visit or to preach; and would have drifted quietly to the grave had it not been for his wife's pathetic reproaches and his nephew's kindness in giving him a home. He had lived in James Ferguson's employment for several years; and it must be stated that Mrs. Blaize's efficiency as a housekeeper amply atoned for any shortcomings on the part of her husband.

She clung to a belief in his superior intelligence, but upon what grounds she based her opinion a stranger would have found it difficult to determine. It was not upon record—in the Eura district—that Mr. Blaize had ever uttered an

original observation : and, though he read incessantly, his learning did not, as was the case with his brother, bear fruit in the shape of quotation or argument. Sometimes, when pacing the garden-walks in the company of his wife's nieces, after a long silence he would halt and turn with a bird-like eagerness which seemed to indicate the birth of a new idea, and then Gretta would hold herself expectant. But no ; "I always think myself," he would remark, and here pause deliberately, "I always think myself—that some flowers are particularly fragrant," whereupon Gretta would laugh hysterically ; and it became the custom at Doondi to preface the most obvious platitude with, "As Mr. Blaize would say I think myself," &c.

Later in the day Mrs. Blaize's secret sorrow found vent. She and Isabel were

sitting alone in the veranda, Patrick Desmond and "Old Gold" having betaken themselves to bathe in the creek. Dusk was falling; a cool wind swept up over the downs. The milkers were lowing on their way to the yard: the fowls were leisurely seeking their roost. Mrs. Blaize stitched assiduously at a pair of riding-breeches she was fashioning, till the light failed her, casting every now and then a tender glance towards her husband, who still hovered over his rose-bushes. She let her hands fall upon her lap, and began to talk.

"I don't know whether to laugh or to cry when I look at my old man. Observe him now, weeding the lawn in that coat. For all the world he might be a hen sitting upon a nest of addled eggs. Well, his eggs are addled—that's about the long and short of it. I wish you could have

seen him as he used to be before his daughter died. I sometimes wonder, in all reverence, my dear, whether the Almighty just realises His responsibilities in dealing with us human beings. When ye think of what a small thing would have made all the difference to one of us, and have been nothing at all to Him, it's hard to see why it shouldn't have been given. Most people have a right to expect that the laws of nature won't pass them by, but it seems as though that was too much to ask. It's a sad thing for a woman when she has no little ones of her own to love. I don't give a mother much credit for keeping herself clear from the pitfalls of life; but there's a deal of credit in living respected and doing nothing much amiss when there are no soft arms to hold you tight back from mischief. And it's a sad thing, and a bitter thing," continued the



old lady, "when you feel that, by bearing your husband bairns, you might have made up to him for the great grief of his life."

There was a little pause, during which Mrs. Blaize wiped away a tear and Isabel watched Mr. Blaize, reflecting that a love which could encircle that grey head with a halo of romance must be indeed powerful. It was borne in upon her for the first time that the old as well as the young have their heart-dramas; and she wondered that, with all these under-currents of sentiment flowing in unexpected places, life could ever seem prosaic.

"It is children who keep human hearts green," continued Mrs. Blaize. "There's poor Hester Murgatroyd, worse than a widow at eighteen. If her child had lived she would have been flesh and

blood instead of the queer dreamy creature she is now."

"Is Mrs. Murgatroyd cold, then?" asked Isabel.

"Cold!" echoed the old lady; "starved, petrified, my dear. And what would you have? Better be a marble woman than love too late. She had her disappointment, and now she looks upon every man as a brute, and lives in her books. She is the most unpractical creature, and it's a mercy that Gretta shows a taste for house-keeping. You'll admire Gretta. She's a taking creature, with just a look of birth and breeding that fits in somehow with her flightiness. But that is not surprising, for her mother and my first husband were O'Haras, and Duncan Reay has good blood in his veins for all that he began life as a shearer. Ah, my dear, there's strange

ups and downs in Australia. If I were just to tell you a few of my experiences in the early days at Oreti Downs ! ”

“ Oh, pray do, Mrs. Blaize ! ” exclaimed Isabel ; and the old lady began the monologue, which conversation was apt to become when she took part in it.

“ That was the name of my first husband’s station. It was just on the borders of civilised country. All beyond was unexplored, except by blacks, and they were so savage that the first thing Mr. O’Hara taught me was how to use a gun. I became a capital shot, and the blacks used to say ‘ That fellow White Mary cobbon saucy. Plenty bong, gun along a that fellow.’ I was a girl not as old as you when I came out with my husband, and was brought up in a sober English village, I daresay much as you have been brought up.”

Isabel leaned sympathetically forward, and her eager questions interrupted the flow of Mrs. Blaize's reminiscences.

"Yes, I once killed a black fellow. Don't talk of it; the thought lies like lead on my soul. I feel that I can't do enough to christianise the poor creatures, as a sort of atonement. . . . It was the only thing to do. I was alone. There wasn't even a Chinaman about the place, and Mr. O'Hara was counting sheep, fifteen miles off." Mrs. Blaize shuddered. "Counting the sheep was a great business," she resumed; "it had to be done at sundown and of course, night had always set in before my husband returned. . . . No, I was never very frightened; but, if I thought there were any blacks about, I used to shut the doors as well as I could, call the dogs, and walk round the house with my pistol. You see we had no

proper fastenings to our shutters, and no panes of glass; and, sitting in the light, I should have been such a good target for a spear. . . . .

“Upon one occasion, when Mr. O’Hara was absent, Ah Sing, a Chinese shepherd, whom we had turned into a cook, rushed in to me, trembling like a leaf. ‘Missee!’ he whispered, ‘me see muchee black man. All come round outside kitchen.’

“There they were—an army of them—naked, tattooed creatures, very quiet, as blacks are when they mean mischief. Yes. I was frightened then; but to show that I was so would have been death—or worse. I took my gun and gave a pistol to Ah Sing, but he shook so that he couldn’t hold it; then I went out and boldly pointed the muzzle at one of the two foremost. ‘You yan,’ I said, as impressively as I could. ‘Ba’al

you sit down a long a humpy to-night.' The wretches seemed to hesitate. One of them raised his spear. I put my finger on the trigger of my gun, ready to fire. He saw that I was in earnest and dropped the spear, and presently they all moved away. Oh, it's very easy to cow the blacks ; they have a terror of firearms.

“ There was a great deal that was amusing in the life, rough as it was ; but after I had been four years at Oreti Downs I felt a perfect craving to speak to a woman. I had not seen one since my arrival, and I used to lie awake at night planning how I could get to the nearest township where Mr. Blaize and his wife lived, and that was nearly two hundred miles off. At last my husband and I started on our long ride. I shall never forget the first night we camped out—the clear sky above us with all its wonderful stars ;

the strange sounds, and the loneliness and *bigness* of the bush. It gave me quite an eerie feeling. My dear, the story of that ride would take hours to tell. Little did I think then that I should ever be married to the man I was going to visit. At his house I saw, for the first time, my brother-in-law Gustavus Blaize, who had just married the most beautiful creature I ever beheld. For her sake I have always kept up a tender feeling towards 'Old Gold,' but he is too full of self-conceit for my taste. They had only been a few months out from England, and she was just a glory of lace and fine linen. She laughed at my outlandish dresses, and did up my hair in the style she wore her own. I used to have beautiful hair," and unconsciously Mrs. Blaize touched her yellow-grey curls. "She took my gowns to pieces and made

them up anew; and we danced, sang, rode, and walked, and were as happy as a pair of school-girls.

“The next time I saw her was at Oreti Downs, where she came to pay us a visit with her husband—and a bath. I remember the bath well, for it seemed such an odd thing to travel about the bush with. They stayed for three months, and, as far as she was concerned, might have stayed for ever, but he was lazy and cowardly and full of fine talk—in fact the most aggravating person to have in the house, for when he was stuffed he was thirsty, and as soon as his thirst was quenched he wanted to be stuffed again. While we were singing over our tubs and making merry at our baking he would sit in the veranda with his book and a glass of brandy. My dear, I'll tell you in confidence that it's brandy that ruined



his liver and killed his wife ; he has seen the folly of his ways and amended them, but it's true, and brandy has a deal to answer for in Australia. There he would sit sipping his grog, and crying out ' Oh, this is rural ! This is idyllic ! This is truly poetic ! This is a life worth living ! ' But when there came an alarm of blacks he would let me go to the front with his gun, and hide himself till it was over. . . . . But, my dear Miss Gauntlett, I've let my tongue run away with me ; times have changed since then. My old man has gone in, and here are the fencers for their rations. They'll be pleased to hear that a bullock has been killed, after having lived on salt-junk for a month."

## CHAPTER XIII.

## WYEROO DIGGINGS.

“Now then, now then! Roll up for the Diggings. Who is for the Wyeroo deep sinkings, where all the best gold is found? Take you twelve miles for half-a-crown, gentlemen; a cheap ride and a good one. Take you for eighteen-pence. Take you for nothing, sir, but the pleasure of your company and whatever you choose to give me.”

The scene was a rough bush township, which might have been at the other end

of nowhere, so desolate and uninhabited was the surrounding region, limestone ridges rising out of flat eucalyptus-grown country, stony pinches covered with grass-trees—sure indication of unprofitable soil, bolder-mountains in the background; and here, where the Gundalunda buggy had halted to water and refresh the horses, a cluster of bark huts, a low railway-shed dignified by the name of terminus, and a dirty uninviting-looking tent, surmounted by a placard on which was printed in crooked letters “The Dead Finish Restaurant.”

The train had just steamed on. Before “The Dead Finish” one of Cobb’s coaches was drawn up, and upon the boot a man was seated, dressed digger-fashion, with a dirty cabbage-tree hat and a bowie-knife stuck in his belt, gesticulating wildly with his arms and

holding forth inducements to the undecided or unwary to take their places for the Wyeroo deep sinkings.

A little band of third-class passengers, carrying valises and blankets, some with pickaxes, and all with the inevitable pint-pot and tin billy, hurried from the terminus to the coach. Some of the men took their seats at once ; others, evidently bushmen, hesitated, half turned away ; and finally, seduced by the blandishments of the guard, tossed up their blankets, and clambered into the clumsy vehicle, which rattled off over the stony road, the driver turning his head and proposing a race with the buggy.

“ Sure, and ’tishn’t much we mind giving ye the start, for we shall catch you up on the sandy flat,” derisively shouted Patrick Desmond.

Easily done. The coach-horses were

lean and the coach was heavy. The spanking Gundalunda team of four sped over the level ground, and made light of the hills, which grew steeper and more numerous as they advanced, for they were approaching the mountainous district of the Upper Eura. Mr. Gustavus Blaize handled the reins, and now that the way had become more difficult, was debarred from casting back those tender glances at Miss Gauntlett which had been more than once intercepted by Mrs. Blaize, and had called forth the wrathful ejaculation, "Old fool!" Isabel perceived that no one appeared to regard Old Gold's amorous proclivities as anything but an immediate nuisance, and did not allow herself to be discomposed thereby. On the whole it was a merry drive. Mrs. Blaize's tongue never ceased wagging about nothing in particular, and

Patrick Desmond kept up a running fire of Irish would-be witticisms, holding himself all the time in readiness to jump down whenever a fallen log impeded progress, or a leader showed signs of restiveness as a startled wallabi crossed the path or a herd of kangaroo bounded by.

It was wild country. The road slanted down ridges, crossed steep gullies and threaded rocky gorges, where grew delicate ferns, native hoyas, the blue sarsaparilla, and beautiful scarlet kennedia. Now they entered a dense scrub where perpetual twilight reigned, while strange dank creepers twined the ghostly trunks of the bottle-trees, and the clearings seemed like vast cathedral aisles. Here the air was steamy and the stillness oppressive; but, once more out in the open, a warm breeze fanned the long-bladed grass.

locusts whirred, and birds and insects held jubilee.

Presently the hills were dotted with slab dwellings and low lines of tents. Trees had been cut down. In the gullies were holes hollowed by the gold-seekers; while here and there great heaps of earth and mullock, and unsightly erections for crushing quartz, indicated the whereabouts of a claim.

The buggy rattled down a long straggling street lined with zinc-roofed sheds, stores, and weather-board shanties, and beyond the town, on to a billowy plain full of deserted holes, in the centre of which a solitary Chinaman was watering his little garden, and after the patient habits of his nation was making a livelihood out of the workings abandoned by more adventurous Europeans.

The buggy stopped at a little wayside

inn close by ; the horses were taken out, some drinkables purchased, and Mrs. Blaize's well-provided luncheon-basket unpacked beneath the shade of a great apple-tree gum, not far from the Chinaman's garden. When they had reached the dessert stage the ancient Celestial, in his blue smock and wearing a pigtail, came forth bearing flat-stone peaches, guavas, and a water-melon, which he laid for sale before the strangers. He lingered while they ate the juicy fruit, and shook his head over the badness of times.

"My makee garden," he whined. "Before time, ten year ago, my makee plenty money. Just now, oh! too muchee man makee garden—ploit velly little. Diggings here no count. In New South Wales, diggings tai yat for Chinaman. Here, no Chinaman. My velly lonely."



"True for you : a boy is always lonely till he has got a wife," said young Desmond. "You should marry, John."

"Mally!" shrieked the Chinaman. "What for my mally? My no fool—oh! No mally European woman. Englishee woman no good."

And with a glance of contempt at the two ladies John stalked away, carrying his guavas with him.

"There's one for you, Miss Gauntlett," said Desmond. "And that's the Great Phoenix that ye see over there. The shaft is on the hill side, by all those heaps of mullock. You can hear the buzz of the machinery and the roar of the blasting. Come, Mrs. Blaize—sure it's only two hundred feet down in a cage—nothing of a journey."

"Not I," said Mrs. Blaize, stoutly. "Here I shall stay, and discuss the

marriage question with John Chinaman; and I think, Gustavus," she added, in a louder key, "that you had better follow my example, and profit by Asiatic wisdom. Don't you go running after Englishee women."

"Listen, Judith," began Mr. Gustavus, in that grandiloquent tone which announced a quotation—

*"He who bends to himself a joy  
Does the winged life destroy.  
But he who kisses a joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity's sunrise."*

"I kiss as it flies, or rather delves—excuse the far-fetched metaphor—the joy of accompanying Miss Gauntlett into the recesses of the Great Phoenix mine."

Everybody laughed. Isabel had blushed a little, but she was beginning to see that blushes were too high a compliment to pay the Australian "chaff." She grew nervous at the thought of Lady

Hetherington's dismay, could she have been present, and was relieved when Mrs. Blaize created a diversion by sending young Desmond after the Chinaman and his basket of guavas.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE MINER BRADDICK.

ISABEL, Desmond, and Mr. Gustavus walked to the mouth of the shaft.

The manager's time, the mine, the men, were placed at Miss Gauntlett's disposal. Some hurried orders having been given, the party took their seats in a queerly-constructed cage, and found themselves descending into the bowels of the earth. The cage swayed to and fro ; there was a sense of oppression and suffocation. Mr. Gustavus coughed and groaned.

"Oh, my enemy!" cried he, tragically.

"'Is it the devil that Mr. Gustavus Blaize has got in his inside?' Jinks Clephane always asks," said Mr. Desmond, aside to Isabel. "And av it's the devil," she says, "he'd better be whopped like father whops me."

The cage touched the bottom. A miner standing on one side handed each a lantern. The man was evidently known to Patrick Desmond, for he nodded.

"How's yourself, old fellow? I'll be after having a word with you by-and-bye."

The miner did not answer, but held back, letting them pass on into a narrow passage tunnelled in the reef. Then he followed at the distance of several paces. The dark walls closed them in like the sides of a tomb. Every now and then, a gleam from one of the lanterns revealed a

trickle of moisture, or a brightly-veined seam of quartz. The air was stifling. Their footsteps fell with a dull noise, and their voices echoed strangely. The only other sound to be heard was the distant thud of pickaxes at work.

The manager walked in front as guide. Isabel and her two squires, abreast, came next. She tried to widen the distance as much as possible, for her position was embarrassing to a young lady conventionally brought up. On one side, Old Gold, his sense of hearing deadened, bawled elaborate compliments in the intervals between his stumbles; on the other, Patrick Desmond poured into her ear a stream of undertoned comment.

“The English snowdrop will ere long be changed into a bright-hued exotic,” said Mr. Gustavus, concluding some

inquiries concerning Isabel's health with an allusion to her recent transplantation.

"Faith then, and it's the potting of ye he'd like to be having," whispered Pat. "Miss Gauntlett, I'll be beforehand with him. Your room in my heart will be kept nice and warm, well swept and dusted. It's a sky-parlour on the right side of the throb."

"Poor little flower!" tenderly observed Old Gold, falling at the moment over a heap of rubbish. But he recovered himself, and continued with dignity: "You perhaps know those exquisite words of a German author, which would seem to refer to such chance enjoyments as that which your short stay at Gundalunda has procured for us."

"He'd talk the head off a hatchet," murmured Patrick.

"Ahem! 'So many rich and lovely

flowers which bear no fruit spring up on the 'pathway of life that it is a happiness poetry was invented' ——"

But the quotation was never finished. Mr. Gustavus in his enthusiasm had quickened his steps, drawing young Desmond with him. Isabel on the other hand had fallen back with the vague intention of changing the conversation, by asking a question of the miner who followed. As she lingered, a low rumble sounded in the gallery. The two foremost turned startled by the noise, and hardly realising how far behind was their companion. "Come, Miss Gauntlett," they cried. But at that moment there was a deeper roar and sharp concussion, then darkness. The earth shook. Isabel felt herself seized in a powerful grip from behind, and drawn almost with the quickness of thought towards side passage, while an



authoritative voice said "Stand back—don't be frightened."

A mass of loosened stone had fallen, extinguishing the lights and blocking up the tunnel. There was a pause of horrified silence broken by the voices of Mr. Gustavus Blaize, Patrick Desmond, and the manager, blending dismayed in a chorus of ejaculations, and reassuring her as to the safety of their owners.

"I am glad they are not hurt," she said, unconsciously drawing a deep breath of relief, and hardly considering whom she was addressing.

The miner uttered a peculiar sound, something between a laugh and a sigh.

"Your first thoughts when danger is past are for others. Ladies are not usually so self-forgetful, except when the safety of those most dear to them is concerned—hardly then. How far less in

the case of comparative strangers ! Excuse me ; of course I heard your conversation. The rock has fallen exactly where you were standing. You only would have been injured. It is fortunate indeed that I was able to pull you back."

Isabel turned, startled by the voice, and unable in the darkness to reconcile it with her first impression of the rough-bearded man in miner's dress who had given her her lantern. The accents she heard were surely those of an English gentleman of refinement and education. So surprised was she that it did not occur to her to express any gratitude for what he had done.

"Miss Gauntlett, Miss Gauntlett!" cried Patrick Desmond from the other side of the barrier, in tones of the deepest anxiety.

"Braddick!" called the manager.

"I am here," answered Isabel, faintly.

"The young lady is not hurt," said the miner. "I will take her back. You will find it difficult to pass that block. Had you not better turn up to the higher level, and let us meet you at the shaft?"

"Why the deuce didn't they attend to my orders, and stop blasting?" said the manager, angrily.

"There has been a mistake," calmly rejoined the man. "It would be better to go back, and not risk its being repeated."

Mr. Blaize eagerly embraced this view of the matter. He entreated Isabel to forgive his involuntary desertion. He implored the manager to proceed to the higher level. Let them gain the surface as quickly as possible. There was no saying what accident might not happen. Patrick Desmond took tender leave of

Isabel through the wall of stone. Their steps died away, and she was left in the darkness with her new companion.

The latter struck a match, and re-lit the candles. She was then able to examine his face. Assuredly, she had been right in her conjecture. On a more prolonged scrutiny the physiognomy confirmed the voice. Whatever his clothes, or the marks of toil upon his person, this man was a gentleman.

A pair of dark grey eyes looked straightly into hers. They were large, full lidded—rather striking eyes. Notwithstanding a certain melancholy in their expression they darted a gleam of humour. The forehead was prominent, the brows full; the features firm and compact. The mouth and chin were concealed by a thick dark moustache and short beard, evidently of recent growth,

which gave an unkempt appearance to the face.

"I ought to say—I don't know how to thank you," began Isabel, confusedly, and paused.

"Not at all. It is I who should beg your pardon for having spoken so freely. To tell the truth, I forgot for the moment that we were in Australia." He glanced down at his soiled garments—the flannel-shirt—collarless, the rough leggings, and at his bare arms and hands, marred by the stains of labour.

"I might have forgotten that, too," answered Isabel. "I have only been a few days in this country."

"Ah! so?" he said, with a look of inquiry; then seemed to check himself. "You are from England," he went on, after a moment's hesitation. "That makes itself evident. I beg your par-

don," seeing that she flushed, "I meant nothing disrespectful. Colonial ladies as a rule like the suggestion that their dress or manner is English. That is curious, but true, as you will discover. With men the case is different. One can't offend a new chum more than by telling him he looks like one. . . . You are pleased with what you have seen of Australian life?"

"I have only seen its bright side as yet."

"Naturally. I hope you will not see any other. At any rate, you have come to the most beautiful part of Leichardt's Land. There is some grand scenery on the Eura river. We ought to be going back, or your friends will reach the shaft before us. Will you follow me?"

He strode on. Isabel crept silently in his wake. She felt dazed, and her bosom was fluttered by vague wonder and

newly-stirred sadness. An odd fancy seized her that the eyes and tones were in some manner familiar ; how, she could not tell. The way was uneven and encumbered by heaps of loose stone. She tripped over one of these. He turned quickly at her half-stifled exclamation.

“It is rough walking. I did not remember that before you had some one on each side. I can’t offer you an arm, but I’ll hold the lamp so that you may pick your steps better.”

They had not far to go. A glimmer of several lamps before them revealed the whereabouts of the shaft. The manager and his companions were approaching by another tunnel. Isabel paused, vividly realizing that this man had saved her life ; that she would in all probability never see him again, and that she had rendered him but the baldest acknowledg-

ment of the service. A strange shyness overpowered her. Suddenly, her dream in the train flashed into her mind. She coloured deeply, and was still more embarrassed by the consciousness that he was now facing her, and by the light of her own candle could observe her blush. "Mr. Braddick—I think that is your name," she began, hesitatingly. "I have not said anything to you that I ought. I might have been killed but for you."

He lowered his lamp, and looked at her earnestly. "We shall perhaps meet again, Miss Gauntlett, and I may then have an opportunity of earning your thanks. I have not done so yet. You are remaining in this district?"

"I am going to stay for some time with my uncle, Captain Clephane."

"At Tieryboo? I passed by there a little while ago, overlanding cattle. For



aught that I know, I may cross the border again soon. When one is digger, stockman, drover—anything in short that offers a means of livelihood—one is apt to find oneself in many different places. And, now that your friends are here, I will leave you. Good-bye.”

There was a note of bitterness in his voice which roused her keenest sympathy. Obeying an impulse, she stretched forth her hand. He did not see, or would not take it. Raising his hat and bowing with distant politeness he turned in the direction whence they had come. Patrick Desmond advanced: “Oh, Miss Gauntlett, it’s thankful that I am,” he began effusively. “You’ll have seen enough of the mine, and Mr. Gustavus will give us no peace till we are out of hearing of gunpowder. Don’t be off in such a hurry,

Braddick," he shouted. "There's something I've got to talk to you about."

But Braddick had disappeared.

They entered the cage, and Mr. Gustavus Blaize succumbed once more under the grasp of his enemy. Isabel was preoccupied, and replied at random to the manager's apologies and invitations to come again. She was experiencing the curious sensation of contact between actual and visionary life. As in the darkness of the storm she had met the gaze of her dream companion, so Braddick's eyes had pierced the gloom of the mine; and both glances were charged with the same fire—the same melancholy.

They lingered for a little while to witness the quartz-crushing operations, then walked across the plain back to where Mrs. Blaize had remained with the buggy. Once again beneath the blue of heaven,

Mr. Gustavus became sentimental and didactic, and proceeded to expatiate upon the relations of Nature with Art and Love, according to him prime factors in the working of the universe. Suddenly he observed,

“The face of that miner who brought you back to the shaft seemed familiar to me, Miss Gauntlett. I connect it with one of my many visits to England, but in what particular, at this moment, eludes my memory. I think you mentioned his name, Desmond.”

“It’s Braddick that he calls himself, and he is the man I was speaking of to Mr. Reay that had been drover to that thief of the world, old Fyson. He is a gentleman, Mr. Gustavus; and, if it’s the private detective business that ye’ll be after, there are plenty more sprigs of gentility down on their luck in these parts

that'll give ye exercise for your brains. Sure if Wyeroo isn't just swarming with the aristocracy, counting meself—for isn't my own cousin Viscount Macrone—with three healthy boys between me and fortune? Ah, Miss Gauntlett, dear, if it's high society that you're pining for, just walk with me by the Boomerang Gully and I'll show you three 'honourables' up to their knees in dirty water, with no more than a blanket a-piece and two tin 'billys' among them."

of superior manufacture, a silver hunting-flask, and a light waterproof which hung over the garden-palings.

"By these tokens I should say that Captain Clephane has brought over a new chum from Nash's, or that Mr. Bertram Wyatt had arrived," said young Desmond.

Mrs. Blaize fluttered across the yard to her husband, full of anxious inquiries as to his welfare during her absence. "You haven't been working in the heat of the sun, have you, now, darling? And if there are any more rations to be weighed let me do it while you chat to Miss Gauntlett. She won't be much longer with us, if it's true that her uncle has come. And where is Duncan Reay?"

Mr. Blaize turned his eyes affectionately upon Isabel. She had often caught his gaze so fixed; and suspected, what was indeed the truth, that she reminded

him of his dead daughter. But he only sighed, saying nothing, then absently placed in his wife's hands the scoop with which he had been ladling-out sugar.

"Mr. Reay has gone home across country: but he has sent a friendly message, Judith, and a letter from Gretta begging us to go over there at Christmas. I think that change of scene is pleasant sometimes, and so will accept the invitation if you are agreeable, and if Mr. Ferguson and his partner are willing."

"Dear heart!" said Mrs. Blaize. "It would be a poor Christmas that we should spend by ourselves at Gundalunda, for James Ferguson isn't likely to stop far from Doondi. Has Mr. Wyatt come?"

"Yes; Mr. Bertram Wyatt has arrived in the company of Captain Clephane, who is anxious to move on to-morrow. I'm sorry to think that we are losing you,

Miss Gauntlett. Here they come: and I'll leave you, for I'm a little out of my element amongst strangers."

The old man shuffled off. Mrs. Blaize was dismissing the last of the hands with a nod and a handful of dried apples for his children. There was a sound of voices in the veranda of the "big house," and Clephane, Ferguson, and a stranger walked across, the two latter side by side, so that Isabel had an opportunity of comparing the owners of Gundalunda.

Mr. Bertram Wyatt in no way resembled his partner. He was of the type which is instinctively associated with European refinement and cosmopolitan experience. In his case the conclusion was hardly justified, for he was Australian by birth: and, though he had been to Oxford, had spent a winter in Italy, and knew as much as most people about English and

continental society, a considerable part of his life had been passed in the colonies.

He was of slender build, brown in colouring, with full eyes set wide apart, a silky moustache, and decidedly handsome profile. His clothes were well made, and none of his movements were clumsy. Without seeming self-conscious, he gave the impression that he fancied himself superior to his surroundings. He had a very pleasant smile, and there was about him a suggestion of romantic experience.

Wyatt had met James Ferguson in Victoria, and, when the latter had sold the station he then owned, the two men joined in a new investment. But Ferguson was considered the working member of the firm; and all Wyatt's knowledge of the Eura district had been gleaned during a hurried visit of inspection prior to the purchase of Gundalunda.



Some excitement was then created by the rumour of his engagement to a daughter of the Governor of one of the neighbouring colonies, but almost before it could be verified Mr. Wyatt sailed for England, and it transpired that the engagement had been abruptly broken off. The Governor in question had lately been transferred to Leichardt's Land.

Wyatt and Mrs. Blaize were old friends, and there was real cordiality in his greeting and in the compliments he paid her upon the improvements she had effected at Gundalunda. It might have been easily seen that sympathy was a necessity to the young man, and there was something taking in his dependence upon the goodwill of those with whom he lived. He seemed disposed to be pleased with everything, congratulated himself upon having made acquaintance with Mr. Reay and

Captain Clephane at Nash's station the night before, and enlarged upon the advantage of having such neighbours as those at Tieryboo and Doondi. He seemed to aim at saying the right thing, but evidently did not wish to appear thoroughly at home in the bush. It was not his sphere, but he was amiably determined to accommodate his aspirations to circumstances. This, every tone conveyed; but the affectation or rather conviction was so unconscious, so entirely apart from any want of good breeding, that it could hardly be quarrelled with. There was something special in his greeting to Isabel: it seemed to take for granted that they must have interests in common, and might have befitted a naturalised foreigner welcoming a fellow-countryman to the land of his adoption. His eye dwelt with pleasure, that was quite im-

personal, upon certain little adornments and peculiarities to be noticed in her dress, not of Australian origin. He began at once to talk about England. She was unresponsive. He appealed to Clephane, old Gustavus Blaize joined eagerly in the conversation, and the three might, for all the world, have been discussing social topics in a London drawing-room. Some spirit of contrariety in Isabel rebelled against the tendency to Anglomania. She was glad to avow ignorance, and to disclaim the imputation of superiority. She felt disposed to range herself upon the side of James Ferguson, who listened with an interest she could not understand, putting in a remark every now and then, which had the savour, so readily detected, of acquaintance with the thing in question by means of books rather than personal experience.

But there was no doubt that Mr. Wyatt had charming manners, was eminently sympathetic, and could talk well. The evening passed pleasantly to all, except perhaps to Mr. Gustavus, who was silent and depressed. Mrs. Blaize, at Wyatt's request, produced from the store-room (cellars are unknown in the bush) some claret of a superior vintage. It may be mentioned incidentally that wine of good quality is not common in Australian stations, where the usual drink is tea or brandy and water. Captain Clephane forgot his Australian character, and was full of questions and comments upon affairs over the water. The ruby liquid was a talisman transporting him to well-remembered scenes from which he was only recalled by the remembrance of his Mollie and an allusion to Jinks. Over the water ! To Ferguson that phrase represented the

mystic world where dwelt Gretta's ideal, so far and yet so near; the great ocean that for the others was completely bridged by sympathies and associations with which he had no part.

Isabel listened and wondered. They were sitting in the veranda open to the night, with the vast lonely bush stretching out to the horizon; and all the strange perfumes and sounds of birds and insects floating in upon the still air. But for these surroundings it would have been difficult to realise that they were many thousands of miles from the scene of their talk. Clephane and Wyatt were discussing the relations of the motherland with her colonies, and condemning the policy which insists upon turning the latter into a haven for the erring and unfortunate. It was absurd to suppose that the riff-raff which must certainly go

to the bottom in more crowded streams would float upon the Australian social current. Leichardt's Land, in especial, was quoted as an effective sink, and emigration a convenient means of enabling impoverished parents to rid themselves of disagreeable incubi in the shape of peniless or vicious younger sons. Involuntarily Isabel thought of the miner Braddick, and a tender feeling of pity stirred her heart as she reflected upon the possible causes which had drifted him to Australia. She felt her face grow hot with a sudden flush when Patrick Desmond interrupted the discussion.

"That man I was talking to you about, Captain Clephane—the drover—was at the Great Phoenix to-day; but he wouldn't give me the chance of a word with him. I'll be wanting a hand if I'm to drive over the cattle you've bought from

Nash's, and, if you are agreeable, I'll give him the job, though it is but a short one."

"It may be longer if he is worth anything," said Clephane, "for there's the mob to be taken north. You can bring him to Doondi, Pat, and we'll see how he shapes. We shan't have any hard work now till after Christmas."

"Ah then sure," said Pat, in a melancholy tone, "it's under some old gum-tree in the Never Never country that I'll be spending my next Christmas after this one. I'll be munching damper and salt-junk."

"And carving it up, and calling one piece mince-pie and another turkey," said Clephane, laughing. "All the more reason we should have a merry Christmas at Doondi."

"You are coming over in a few days,

aren't you, Ferguson?" he went on. "And Mrs. Blaize, we can't do without you to help stir the pudding. As for Wyatt, I have almost persuaded him to ride over with me to-morrow and make acquaintance with my wife and her sisters."

Mr. Wyatt did not require much pressing to accept the invitation. Soon an attractive programme was made out. Clephane, Miss Gauntlett, and Bertram would go to Doondi on the morrow. Ferguson and Mr. and Mrs. Blaize agreed to follow a week later, while Patrick Desmond, taking Wyeroo on his way, and securing the services of Braddick as drover, would betake himself to Nash's station, and put in an appearance at the Reays when the cattle were ready for delivery. Work should be suspended



during the Christmas week, and it was proposed that a favourite project of Gretta's—a camping-out expedition to the Comongin Range—should be put into execution.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## AN AUSTRALIAN DAIRY-MAID.

THE dairy at Doondi was a queer, dilapidated building, standing by itself, a few yards from the courtyard fence—a square slab hut, with wide apertures between the slabs, and a bark roof sloping downwards till it almost met the passion-fruit-covered palisading that inclosed the earthen veranda. Within, it was canvas-lined, cool, dark, and fragrant, with a space between the wall and the roof which allowed the air to play freely upon the tin pans of creamy milk, each

covered with spotless muslin, and upon the earthenware vessels containing pats of butter, which ought to have been hard and golden, but which, to Gretta's despair, were white and flabby, and could not, with the thermometer at 80°, be persuaded to shape themselves into anything like an agreeable consistency. A gum-tree reared its lanky branches above the roof, and every now and then a gust of wind would shake down a little shower of leaves and blossoms upon the water-cart, a large barrel placed horizontally upon a frame of wood, that stood close to the dairy. Every morning Maafu the Kanaka would bring round the blear-eyed stallion, told off for the sober duties of fetching wood and carrying water, would harness him to the shafts, and trundle down to the creek, backwards and forwards many

times, and, after replenishing the butts of corrugated iron that stood at one end of the house, would restore the cart to its former position, so placed that Gretta could draw for herself the water she required for her operations in the dairy.

This was Gretta's province. In early morning and late afternoon she stood over her milk-pans, skimming the cream, moulding her pats of butter, or measuring out their allowance to the hut-keepers; while the pet calves and foals, of which there were always several to be reared by hand at Doondi, the Cochinchina fowls, a tame kangaroo, and a young native bear, drank their fill of the thick milk which Maafu, her factotum, had poured into the wooden troughs outside the veranda.

The heat of the day was over, and Gretta sat upon a little bench under the

trailing green withes that hung from the roof of the dairy, singing as she churned.

The churn stood in a tub of clear cool water. Round and round moved the handle. Sometimes it slipped in its socket, and then the drops would splash up on to Gretta's face and upon the holland apron which covered her blue print-dress. Occasionally she paused to rest for a moment; then would go on again; her thoughts flowing to the rhythmic motion of the wheel, and her snatches of song ceasing, while, with a look of faint expectancy upon her face, her eyes were turned dreamily in the direction of the stockyard, for, whereas Tieryboo and the Selection lay southward across the river, visitors from Gundalunda must certainly appear at the upper slip-rails.

She was a healthy-minded girl, and the

little ebullitions of enthusiasm, the longings for exciting experience for some phase of life which should not be purely pastoral, were no outgrowth of morbid discontent. But Gretta knew that she was pretty, and that she had aspirations beyond the commonplace routine of bush life. She felt with a vague, half-amused resentment, that she had somehow been defrauded of her just rights. At her age most girls had loved—or, at least, been wooed by men worthy of love. But no hero had, as yet, crossed her path; not one, at any rate, whose magic touch should throw open to her that secret chamber of romance which all women so ardently desire to enter. It seemed sometimes to Gretta that she was doomed to live and die on the banks of the Eura without having gained one glimpse of the real world that makes history. Only

shadows, she thought, could ever reach this quiet retreat—shadows of action and of feeling, dim presentments of all those thrilling emotions which she fancied might rule other lives. Was it then in England alone that heart-dramas were enacted? Blind Gretta! who saw nothing of the tragedy passing before her very eyes, and to whom the love-story of Hester Murgatroyd and Durnford was a sealed book.

She was too much occupied with her own dreams to have become aware of the smothered passions burning slowly but fiercely in the breasts of these two quiet people, who were to her merely a part of her own prosaic surroundings. There they both were now in sight, Hester moving sedately about the garden, seemingly intent upon the nosegay she was gathering to place in Miss Gauntlett's room;

and Durnford yonder, in the veranda of the bachelors' quarters, steadily poring over his book. Gretta did not observe the furtive looks which he threw every now and then towards the garden; but, while she wondered vaguely whether James Ferguson would or would not ride over with her brother-in-law that day, and whether, if he did, life would be rendered any the more eventful for his presence, she cast a thought—partly envious, partly compassionate—at the temperaments which were apparently contented with monotony, and required no stimulus of agreeable anticipation to give point to existence.

These theories and speculations were not due to the fact that Gretta was disappointed with her lot, or that she craved excitement and conquest. Of admiration, could she content herself with the kind



offered, she might have had her fill. There was hardly a young squatter or stockrider in the district who was not ready to place himself and his possessions at Miss Reay's feet. But she was fastidious, and, moreover, she had been quite sincere in her declaration that she would marry no one who was Australian pure and simple. Her appreciation of all that emanated from the mother-land was genuine, if exaggerated. It must be remembered that Antipodean youth frames its standard of ideal perfection upon books, which deal only with the associations of the old world, and have no connecting links with the new. A young community must develop in accordance with the peculiar conditions of its being, and it is well known that an original departure from received canons is usually the outcome of exhausted civilisation.

Gretta was in the position of a provincial genius who curses fate that he was not born in London, and can find no fount of inspiration apart from the fret and fever of crowded humanity. Had James Ferguson been educated in England, thus acquiring a certain social polish, and particular modes of thought, and forms of expression which should harmonize with the ideal she had created for herself, Gretta's heart would most likely have responded to his devotion. She knew that he was good, true, and manly. She leaned upon him with a trust of the depth of which she was hardly conscious; and even at times contemplated marriage with him as a distant possibility, when she should have amply proved to herself the fallacy of romantic visions. In the meantime she sighed for a sensation, for a love which should thrill her innocent being.

He inspired her with a homely sort of affection. His society brought her a pleasant sense of protection and comfort. She acknowledged him the superior of all men who had as yet approached her as suitors. But he was not her knight—not her ideal. He was simply James Ferguson, born and bred in Australia—a squatter, like her own father and brother, practical as they were, and as keenly alive to the vital questions of Free Selection, wire-fencing, the marsupial plague, and inoculation. She always saw him in her imagination clad in bushman's garb with hands a little roughened by toil in the yards, with none of those accessories of refined life which she wished to associate with her hero, against a background of eucalyptus trees, lowing cattle, and dull station details. He merely figured as the commonplace personage of fiction—plodding, estimable, and provincial,

who is brought forward as a foil to the fascinating, unreliable man of the world. To the latter, the heroine's woes are chiefly due; but he is the very embodiment of that first principle in a true girl's creed, "Love before all."

In the third volume, the prosaic hero's good qualities rule triumphantly. He steers the heroine into calm. He is the *Deus ex machina* who magnanimously brings about the finale, either by marrying her to the rehabilitated man of her choice, or by consoling her with his own manly virtues; but at best he is only the secondary personage on the stage. Gretta sighed and smiled to think that there were not even the materials for this stock-drama at hand. It was the play with Hamlet wanting.

The churn-handle moved more slowly, and greasy particles exuded from cracks

in the lid, telling that the butter was coming. A critical juncture this, when the precise moment of dashing in the coolest water procurable would determine the quality and consistency of the churning. Gretta *cooeed* for the boys and the children, and presently her bare arms were plunged into the vessel, the flabby mass was brought forth, and the butter-milk poured out in goodly draughts, to the satisfaction of Joe, Mark, and Jinks, to say nothing of the stray piccaninnies who had stolen up unawares.

Mr. Durnford, passing by, nodded and smiled. He was going to join Hester in the garden. The cord of passionate sympathy which bound their hearts together was drawing him too strongly to be resisted. He had not spoken to her alone since their parting on the evening of that memorable thunderstorm. She

had caught a feverish cold, and had only to-day left her room. He knew that there would be but small opportunity for private conversation at present. The Gundalunda party was expected at any moment, was even now in sight ; but at least he might look upon her, and might be the richer and the happier for one of her rare, sweet smiles.

“ Will you have a drink of buttermilk, Mr. Durnford ? ” said Gretta, handing him a pannikin.

He accepted it with a courteous bow.

“ Thank you, Miss Reay. I did not come down for this, though. There are whips cracking across the gully, and I’m going to tell Mrs. Clephane that her husband will be here in a minute or two.

“ Oh, they are coming, are they ? ” said Gretta carelessly, though her colour rose as she spoke. “ Well, I have done my

churning just in time to give them some fresh butter with their scones for tea."

She did not let down her sleeve, or rearrange her apron, and determined that she would not hurry on her operation a jot for the sake of looking like an unoccupied fine lady when Miss Gauntlett should first behold her. She went on deliberately with her work, patting and squeezing the butter, draining off the milky water, and pouring fresh into the pan.

"Now for the mould, Joe; a pat for tea, and one for breakfast, and we'll leave the rest to harden till to-morrow."

"Here they are," cried Joe, as two loud reports from a stock-whip rent the air. "It wouldn't be Clephane if he didn't make you believe that he was behind a mob of scrubbers. If Miss Gauntlett is as jolly as she looks, England for ever! You'll have to get a new habit,

Gretta, and I must lend you my Leichardt's Town billycock, or 'Old Gold' will forsake you to a certainty. As for you, young one," added Jo, nodding confidentially at Jinks, "don't you count on your young man. *You'll* never be Mrs. Patrick Desmond. Long engagements are a mistake, Jinks. What chance has a little witch like you beside that vision of beauty? Poor Jinks! . . . And, oh Moses! Here's a stunner! Has Clephane nabbed another new chum? No; I never saw a new chum that wasn't clad for a voyage to the North Pole. That fellow can sit a horse too—and, by George, he's on Gundalunda Roadster. The London and Oxford mixture, Wyatt, I bet. Oh, I say, Gretta, pull down your sleeves. Don't shock his tender sensibilities. He'll take you for a



dairy-maid. And after having loved a Governor's daughter ! ”

The clatter of horses' hoofs cut short Joe's apostrophes. The dogs began to bark. Jinks set up a cry of,

“Dad, I've been a good girl. Has your niece brought some snow to cool us ? ” and three riders drew up exactly opposite the dairy where Gretta was conducting her operations.

Mr. Bertram Wyatt had an eye for the beautiful, and he had certainly never seen a prettier living picture than that of this young girl, standing out against a dark back-ground of slabs, and framed by trailing passion-creepers. Her baby face, with its peach-like cheeks, great soft eyes, and all its tender dimples, was turned slightly upward. Her attitude, as she manipulated the lump of butter and tossed it on to the dish—which, for

mischiefs sake, Joe held on a level with her shoulder—showed to advantage the curves of her waist and bust.

“Capital, Gretta!” sympathetically murmured Jack Clephane, as he got down and submitted to the embraces of Jinks.

But Gretta’s butter-making was finished. Mr. Reay, at the barking of the dogs, had come forth from the little back veranda room which he called his office, and where, with door and window wide open, he transacted his station business, to the edification of all loiterers in the back-yard. Now, while he assisted Isabel Gauntlett from her horse and introduced his two elder daughters to her, Gretta put away her butter-pat, pulled down her sleeves, unbuttoned her apron, and came shyly forth to greet the new guests.

“And this is Gretta,” said her father,

proudly drawing her towards him ; “ this is the wee woman, though she isn’t so very wee,” he added, lifting his gaze to her respectable height of five feet seven inches. “ Mr. Wyatt, I must introduce you to my youngest daughter, Gretta. And now, come into the parlour. They’ll see after the swags. You’ll be wearying for some tea.”

## CHAPTER XVII.

## FRILLED PETTICOATS.

MOLLIE CLEPHANE felt a little shy of her new niece. It was a slight relief to her mind when she perceived that Isabel was certainly shy also, and appeared to wince somewhat under the steady gaze of Jinks's black eyes. Jinks was given to analysis. She always wanted to know the whys and wherefores, and never took a situation for granted, but reasoned upon it from the past to the future. At the present moment she was trying to determine, from an impartial point of view,

which was the prettiest—her Aunt Gretta or the new arrival. The decision involved other and more complicated considerations. For Jinks was a child of strong affections and of a jealous disposition. It was an understood thing that she loved Patrick Desmond, and that she intended to marry him when she was grown up, and to live with him in England. Jinks was quite of Gretta's opinion in regard to her native land, though her sceptical mind accepted, with cautious reservations, the various statements that were put forth concerning England, and which she was not in a position to verify. Jinks's engagement was a source of amusement to her young uncles at Doondi. She bore their chaff with philosophical composure, for she had already observed, in relation to her Aunt Gretta, that love-making was

considered, on the Eura at all events, a legitimate subject of ridicule. At one time Jinks had suffered serious qualms of jealousy, and had heroically resolved to yield up Patrick to her aunt. But Pat's devotion to Gretta was now cooled down, and he had assured Jinks, in the presence of the whole family, that she was henceforth to reign as queen of his heart. Joe's withering remarks, however, caused Jinks's faith to waver. Pat had once loved Gretta. Pat was notoriously fickle. Clearly, if Miss Gauntlett possessed greater beauty than Gretta, that surplus quantity might be the ruin of Jinks's happiness, for never, never could Jinks love again.

"Don't stare so, Jinks," said Mrs. Clephane, sternly.

"I'm sure she isn't as pretty as Aunt Gretta. Her eyes are not as big, and

she has no colour in her cheeks," triumphantly exclaimed Jinks, and was immediately told that little girls should hold their tongues in presence of their elders and betters.

Jinks lowered her eyes. "I am going into the garden," said she, with dignity. "I shall talk to Maafu—he is not my better. You needn't be afraid, Aunt Hester; I shall keep my promise, and be a lady."

In alarm, Mrs. Clephane demanded what she had to say to Maafu.

"I am going to ask him how he made his hair yellow," said Jinks, and departed looking the picture of innocence, but with a deep scheme already laid in her heart.

The princesses in the story-books had always golden locks, and her father drew a sharp distinction between bad black haired children like herself and the blue-

eyed fair-haired little girls who never fell into tantrums or wanted whopping. Isabel Gauntlett's hair was like unspun silk, Maafu's resembled tow, but there was sufficient similarity in the colour of the two to set Jinks's imagination working; and, as she was aware that Maafu had turned his wiry locks from black to yellow, it occurred to her that she might accomplish a like transformation, and establish an incontestable claim to Pat Desmond's favour.

Mrs. Clephane had taken her guest into the little veranda room allotted to her, upon which much housewifely care had been expended. Hester Murgatroyd accompanied them with the bouquet she had gathered, and placed it in a vase upon the dressing-table. Isabel thanked her, and made some timid advances towards friendship, but Hester was too indifferent



or self-absorbed to return them with any cordiality. Presently she left the aunt and niece together.

"I hope you and Uncle Jack won't find me a great trouble," said Isabel, in a deprecatory tone; "my sister — we all thought it very kind of you to be willing to receive me."

"I hope you won't think us very rough," piteously returned Mollie, feeling awkward and stiff; "you have been accustomed to a different sort of life, and to comforts, perhaps, that we haven't got. We can only give you a welcome, and — and, every one says the scenery about us is very fine. Of course it's very nice to be near Doondi," she went on with nervous hurry; "but I almost wish that Jack hadn't thought quite so much about the scenery when he bought Tieryboo — and Gundalunda for sale, too, at that time!"

“Why?” asked Isabel, vaguely.

“Oh, we are not fit for anything but store-cattle, we are all blady grass and brigalow scrub, you know, and fine scenery doesn’t make up for that. And then we are on the other side of the border, and our drays have to come up through New South Wales, which takes a long time. There’s no driving-road across the mountains from here, and I’m afraid you’ll have to leave your big boxes here. And just now we are short of stores,” she added, confusedly; “and there’s no Liebig’s Essence, or cocoa, or bottled porter, or anything tasty on the station—and you’re so delicate, aren’t you?”

“Oh please!” cried Isabel, dismayed, “you needn’t make an invalid of me, and I don’t want bottled porter. I am quite strong now. It was only that I had congestion of the lungs this autumn,

and the doctors said I ought to spend a year in a warm climate."

"Well," said Mollie, in a tone of satisfaction, "it is hot enough here. It's too hot for most people. But I think I'd rather have it than your cold; and we have no mosquitoes on the Eura—that's one good thing."

Isabel remembered the railway journey and Jerry's tail, and assented that it was a good thing; but added that she did not mind mosquitoes.

"All new chums say that," replied Mollie, darkly; "but just wait till they have to camp out without nets!"

There was a pause. Isabel had taken off her gloves, and Mollie's eyes wandered from the English girl's slim white hands, which looked as though they had been modelled for show under a glass-case, down to her own, sun-browned and

roughened by work. She felt also the great contrast between her home-made gown, and her general air of rusticity, and Isabel's perfectly-cut riding-habit, and graces of manner and bearing.

Mollie had always cherished a secret resentment against Jack's "grand English relations," two or three of whom had written to her on her marriage in terms of distant cordiality, and had taken no notice of her since, till a temporary home was required for Isabel.

"She is like a figure out of a fashion-book," thought Mollie; "she is full of English ways. How she will despise us all! I daresay that she is wondering now what could have induced Jack to marry such a common stupid sort of person as I am."

Isabel's wistful gaze failed to correct the impression.

"You'd like to change your habit," said Mollie. "We have a tea-dinner at seven—that is, most of us drink tea—it's the regular thing in the bush, you know. But there's wine, or anything else you like."

"I like tea," seriously answered Isabel.

"I'll help you to put your things away," said Mollie. "And, oh, they haven't brought your pack in; I'll see after it."

She went out, but presently returned followed by a black boy with the two canvas-bags that contained a part of Isabel's wardrobe—the rest had been left in her trunks at Gundalunda, to be brought over on the first convenient opportunity. The black boy grinned, and made the clicking noise against his teeth which with the natives is expressive of admiration. "Tsch! Tsch!" he said.

"Budgery grass belonging to that fellow White Mary."

"He means your hair," explained Mollie, touching a thick flaxen rope which had fallen loose upon the young girl's shoulder.

They both laughed, and this broke the ice a little. Mollie began to take the things out of the saddle-bags, and to arrange them in the cedar cupboard, which was evidently of home manufacture.

"Oh!" protested Isabel, "I am not quite useless. You musn't begin by waiting on me, Aunt—Aunt Clephane."

Mollie paused with an elaborately-frilled petticoat in her arms, which she was contemplating with puckered brow, and asked abruptly,

"Haven't you got any plain ones? I mean," she added nervously, for Isabel looked surprised, "it would be such a

pity to spoil this beautiful linen in the washing; and we're obliged to have it done by a half-caste woman at Tieryboo. It was such a piece of work teaching her how to get up Jack's shirts."

"I've plenty of plain ones, Aunt Clephane," replied Isabel, submissively. "I'll put these away." There was a tremble in her voice. She was tired and strange, and Mollie's evident distrust of her power of adaptability jarred upon her sensitive nature.

"Won't you call me Mollie?" said Mrs. Clephane, impulsively. "Aunt doesn't seem natural. You're not so very much younger than I am."

"I am twenty-one," said Isabel. "I will gladly call you Mollie."

"And I am thirty. Hester is thirty-two, and Gretta is twenty. And then there's Sib and the boys. You'll get to

know all about us soon, and all about Australia too."

"I'm very ignorant," said Isabel. "I don't know anything about Australia except what I've read in *Geoffrey Hamlyn*."

"There," exclaimed Mollie, with a quicker perception of her point of vantage than might have been expected in one so stolid. "I have the pull over you, for we are always reading English novels. Though, to be sure, if they are as unlike you as *Geoffrey Hamlyn* is unlike us on the Eura."—— She paused in perplexed recollection of certain florid descriptions of European society which Jack had pronounced "rot," but which she fancied might be in harmony with Isabel Gauntlett's experience of life. "I suppose they *are* like you. At all events you put me in mind of a person in a book."

"I don't feel like one," answered Isabel,



with a little laugh; "or rather, I never did in England. I think this is like a book. Nothing exciting ever happened to me till I came out here—till the other day," and she stopped and blushed.

"What was that?" asked Mollie with interest. "Did it happen while you were at Gundalunda? It wasn't a proposal from Gustavus Blaize? That's nothing: he proposed to Gretta last week."

Isabel laughed again.

"It wasn't that. It was only going to Wyeroo, and being taken down the mine. There was some blasting, and a piece of rock fell quite close to me. I might have been killed." She halted, shrinking from mention of her deliverer; and, dreading further questioning, she counterqueried, "Why isn't *Geoffrey Hamlyn* like you?"

"Oh, we are not all convicts," began Mollie—it was now her turn to blush

hotly—"and we are not all great people in disguise," she went on hurriedly. "And station-life isn't a picnic, nor need you be afraid of bushrangers in these parts, though indeed our mailman was in a regular funk the other day, for there's a report that a new Ned Kelly, who calls himself Captain Rainbow, has started over the border, and stuck up the Preston mail. But I won't frighten you, and I am keeping you from dressing. You'll hear a bell ring soon; and, if you are not in the veranda, I'll come for you here."

Isabel put out her hands. Her pretty beseeching face was turned up towards Mollie, and Mrs. Clephane's shyness was so far overcome that she bent forward and kissed it warmly. "I think we'll just try to be like sisters. I know we shall get on. You didn't mind what I said about the petticoats?"

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Thus a good understanding was established between the two, and rapidly cemented to a close friendship, when a further dive into Isabel's saddle-bags produced a little Bond Street frock for Jinks, and sundry nick-nacks for Mollie herself, which Lady Hetherington had chosen. The gifts and Isabel's gentle appeal brought about a complete change in Mollie's attitude, and the simple-minded, homely Australian woman was herself again.

END OF VOL. I.



